HER MAJESTY’S GOVERNMENT

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

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4 June 2019
Oral Answers to Questions

JUSTICE

The Secretary of State was asked—

Prison Officers: Suicide

1. Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): How many prison officers took their own lives in each of the past five years.

The Minister of State, Ministry of Justice (Robert Buckland): We do not hold the specific information requested by the hon. Gentleman. I fully appreciate that the pressures on prison officers can be considerable. However, we are committed to ensuring the health, safety and wellbeing of our staff, and have systems in place where if people are struggling, for whatever reason, including outside-work pressures, they will get the support they need.

Luke Pollard: Right across the public sector, the Government do not keep enough statistics on people in uniform who are taking their own lives due to physical and mental pressures at work. Will the Minister agree to meet me and members of the Prison Officers Association to discuss how we can record those statistics and, most importantly, how we can prevent prison officers from taking their own lives?

Robert Buckland: The hon. Gentleman raises a very important and sensitive point. I should add that the prison chaplaincy service provides invaluable support for many prison officers who are struggling. I will meet him about this issue. The current figures record deaths in service. Clearly, the issue of mental health and people taking their own lives has to be addressed.

Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): May I start by welcoming my hon. and learned Friend to his post? I think this is the first question time that he has taken in his new role. Does my hon. and learned Friend agree that it is important that we not only pay the highest tribute to the dedication and professionalism of the men and women of our Prison Service, but recognise that the pressures that they face come in no small measure from the difficulty of establishing secure regimes and stability within our prisons? Will he take on board the recommendations of the Justice Committee—in particular, our suggestion for a workforce strategy across the whole of the Prison Service?

Robert Buckland: My hon. Friend raises an important point. I pay tribute to the work of his Committee. We have seen welcome increases in the number of prison officers, and that will help with stability. Retention rates are very important. I will certainly study very carefully the recommendations of his Committee, and work with him and other Members to make sure that we achieve our common goal.

Helen Jones (Warrington North) (Lab): Prison officers do a very difficult job on behalf of the community, but the loss of thousands of staff, leading to the highest-ever number of assaults in prisons last year, has put them under enormous stress. Does the Minister accept that warm words are not good enough in this situation and there needs to be a serious increase in the number of prison staff to alleviate the pressure on officers?

Robert Buckland: My hon. Friend raises an important point. I pay tribute to the work of his Committee. We have seen welcome increases in the number of prison officers, and that will help with stability. Retention rates are very important. I will certainly study very carefully the recommendations of his Committee, and work with him and other Members to make sure that we achieve our common goal.
Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): I congratulate my hon. and learned Friend on his new appointment.

One of the issues that adds to the emotional stress on prison officers can be a very long commute at the end of their appointment. I was pleased recently to join students at Anglia Ruskin University’s law clinic to celebrate the first year of their Support@Court service, which helps litigants in person to navigate the family courts. It is a great initiative, but Sarah Calder, the director, tells me that provision is patchy, and litigants in person all too frequently feel intimidated by facing a lawyer. Do the Government support the Bach Commission’s proposal that legal aid should be brought back into scope for all cases involving children?

Paul Maynard: I am pleased to hear that about example at Anglia Ruskin University. Our litigants in person strategy is a very important part of what we do. We have been spending £1.5 million a year hitherto. As part of the legal support action plan, we will improve that to £3 million a year and work with judges to ensure that all litigants in person are supported during the court process.

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Con): In children’s matters in the family courts, the Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service is treated as an expert witness. Is the Minister aware that CAFCASS has no training for the function it performs, has no guidelines, keeps no record of its recommendations and does not give sworn statements, so cannot be held to account for the recommendations it makes?

Paul Maynard: I am grateful for that interesting perspective in my early days in the job. I will clearly have to go away and look at what CAFCASS says and does,
and I look forward to meeting it. It is important to bear in mind that, in these cases, the interests of the child have to be paramount—the Children Act 1989 is very clear about that, and judges are clear in how they interpret that obligation.

Post-conviction Disclosure

3. Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): What steps he is taking to improve the post-conviction disclosure regime. [911108]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Edward Argar): If material comes to light that, on the face of it, might cast doubt on the safety of a conviction, the police and prosecuting authorities should disclose it, and where it is alleged that such material may exist, they should co-operate in making further inquiries if there appears to be a real prospect that they will uncover something of real value. Failing that, the function of the independent Criminal Cases Review Commission is to investigate possible miscarriages of justice. Access to information about the cases they investigate is integral to investigating pre-conviction material from the police and the prosecution is very valuable. Most advanced countries have a proper system that makes it much more possible to challenge an unsafe conviction. Can we have further movement on that?

Edward Argar: The hon. Gentleman rightly highlights his extensive work in this area. It has been a pleasure to meet him on a number of occasions, and I am due to do so again. As I said, there are considerable statutory powers for the CCRC, but as he knows, the commission can refer only those cases it considers to meet the statutory criteria, and there are no plans currently to review that.

Mr Sheerman: The Minister will know that I welcome part of what he said warmly, but as co-chair of the all-party parliamentary group on miscarriages of justice, I know that in order to challenge a conviction, access to pre-conviction material from the police and the prosecution is very valuable. Most advanced countries have a proper system that makes it much more possible to challenge an unsafe conviction. Can we have further movement on that?

Edward Argar: The hon. Gentleman rightly highlights his extensive work in this area. It has been a pleasure to meet him on a number of occasions, and I am due to do so again. As I said, there are considerable statutory powers for the CCRC, but as he knows, the commission can refer only those cases it considers to meet the statutory criteria, and there are no plans currently to review that.

John Howell (Henley) (Con): Does the Minister agree with me that forensic science is a major area where a lack of transparency is inhibiting the review of post-sentencing disclosure?

Edward Argar: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to highlight the importance of forensic science in convictions—increasing the number of cases that go through court and result in convictions—and therefore of the role it plays in reviewing cases post-conviction. If he wishes to write to me with further details of specific issues in that context, I will be very happy to write back to him responding to those points.

Yasmin Qureshi (Bolton South East) (Lab): Both the Charlie Taylor and the Lammy reviews recommended changes to our criminal disclosure system for young people. On each count, this Government decided that they knew better, leaving us with one of the most punitive approaches to youth justice in the western world. Now that the Government have lost their case in the Supreme Court, will they recognise that our current disclosure system for children is outdated, ineffective and cruel?

Edward Argar: My shadow is dextrous in bringing in youth justice in the context of the post-conviction disclosure regime. She is quite right to highlight the Supreme Court case and the current regime, which is something we are looking at carefully.

Mr Speaker: I think we can agree that dexterity is a very important political quality.

Prison Violence

4. Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of trends in the level of violence in prisons. [911109]

15. Alex Norris (Nottingham North) (Lab/Co-op): What recent assessment he has made of trends in the level of violence in prisons. [911120]

The Minister of State, Ministry of Justice (Robert Buckland): Violence against our dedicated staff will not be tolerated. Levels of violence in prison remain too high, but I am pleased to say that the number of assaults from October to December last year decreased by 11% from the previous quarter. We know that positive relationships between staff and prison officers can make a big difference. That is the aim of the new key workers scheme, and 60 of the 92 closed male adult prisons have now completed implementing it.

Mr Cunningham: Prison officers work in what their trade unions call one of the most hostile environments in western Europe, with assaults on staff quadrupling since 2010. Does the Minister not think it is a bit unfair for a prison officer at 68 years of age to be forced to manhandle people and physically control them? Surely he could do something about early retirement for them.

Robert Buckland: It is important to remember that for many years prison officers have daily faced that sort of challenge. It is unacceptable, which is why I am glad to say that numbers of prison officers have increased. With that important work with prisoners, I strongly believe that prisons will become safer places. Let us not forget the roll-out of body-worn cameras as well: 6,000 have now been provided. I believe that that will not only protect prisoners, but protect prison officers from false allegations.

Alex Norris: HMP Nottingham remains a particularly violent place for staff and inmates. The previous prisons Minister made improving this prison a personal priority. Will the new Minister commit to doing the same, and will he meet me to hear some of our local concerns?

Robert Buckland: I know from my previous role that the hon. Gentleman takes a keen interest in criminal justice issues in his city. I share the same commitment as my predecessor to reducing violence at Nottingham. A new violence reduction strategy was launched by that prison. We provided funding for physical alterations to set up a new violence reduction landing, and two safer custody leads are now working in the prison to improve physical security. Of course I will meet him as part of that developing progress.
21. [911127] Maria Caulfield (Lewes) (Con): The recent prison inspector’s report on HMP Lewes in my constituency found systemic failure, even after it went into special measures, with an increase in the number of assaults on staff and a quarter of inmates feeling unsafe. What more can the Department do to support the new governor, Hannah Lane, in turning around that prison and making it a safer place for inmates and prison officers?

Robert Buckland: My hon. Friend is quite right to chart the issues at HMP Lewes. I am glad to say that the prison is now fully staffed and performance has begun to improve in the second half of last year, but I accept that things have not recovered to the position that Lewes had been in when the inspectorate made a previous visit. However, the number of assaults has fallen to a level similar to that of three years ago, and work continues to be done. From the centre, both I and Her Majesty’s Prison and Probation Service will continue to support the new governor in her work.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): Is the new prisons Minister prepared to repeat the pledge of his predecessor that he will resign if there is not a significant reduction in violence in prisons within 12 months?

Robert Buckland: As I have said already in this House in an Opposition day debate, I am going to do it my way.

Mr Speaker: Well, I think we will take that as a no, then.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): I have been taking part in the Prison Service parliamentary scheme at HMP Swansea, where over only two days I witnessed one dirty protest and two incidents at height. These were handled professionally by prison staff, officers and management alike, but surely the Minister shares my concern that prison officers are now expected to respond to such physically demanding and risky challenges as everyday workplace hazards? Will he meet the POA to discuss the absolute anomaly of our expecting emergency services officers to work until they are 68?

Robert Buckland: I pay tribute to the right hon. Lady for taking part in that important and valuable scheme. HMP Swansea was the very first prison I went into, nearly 30 years ago, and I pay tribute to the staff there. I have already spoken to the POA about that very issue, and I will continue a dialogue on that and many other matters.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): How about this as a deterrent to violence in prisons: a prisoner who assaults a prison officer is simply not eligible for early release?

Robert Buckland: My hon. Friend will be reassured to know that that sort of conduct and criminality is dealt with in two ways. The first is by the criminal courts. The recent Act promoted by the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) covers prison officers, and I pay tribute to him for that. The second is via an internal process by which prisoners face consequences such as privileges being removed and categorisation changed.

Imran Hussain (Bradford East) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. and learned Gentleman on his appointment. By now, he will know that since 2010 our prisons have been driven into a spiral of violence and a state of emergency as a direct result of his Government’s cuts, leaving staff, prisoners and the public less safe. Will he answer one simple question: when will our prisons return to being as safe as they were in 2010?

Robert Buckland: I think the work being done to recruit extra prison officers and the extra finance and resource given to my Department by the Treasury are allowing us to return to a position of greater safety. I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his remarks, but I have to say to him that my experience of prisons stretches back a generation, and I know that many of the issues relating to prisons take a long time to resolve, but that will not stop me having a sense of urgency when it comes to dealing with problems of drugs, violence and safety more generally.

Rehabilitating Prisoners: Role of Sport

5. Douglas Ross (Moray) (Con): What assessment he has made of the role of sport in rehabilitating prisoners. [911110]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Edward Argar): Participation in sport and physical activity in custody can have benefits for the physical and mental health of prisoners, as well as building confidence, teamwork skills, discipline and improving prospects of successful rehabilitation and resettlement in the community. We have recently published Professor Rosie Meek’s independent review of the role of sport in youth justice, and our own internal review of sport in the adult estate. Sport is an integral part of our approach to rehabilitation in prison.

Douglas Ross: I refer the House to my declaration of interest. The twinning project led by David Dein aims to take football into prisons to improve behaviour and reduce reoffending, and the Football Association referees department is now hoping to run referee courses alongside that, with Lancaster Farms Prison the first to offer the course. I know that the skills referees gain go far beyond officiating at match. Does the Minister agree that that element and the twinning project could have a very positive impact on the prisoners they work with, and will he encourage more prisons to get involved?

Edward Argar: My hon. Friend is absolutely right, and I acknowledge his interest as a qualified international referee, with skills that, on occasion, you probably put to good use in this House, Mr Speaker. I completely agree that the football twinning project, brilliantly led by David Dein, is hugely important and can have a positive effect on offenders. We have been working with FA referees to develop a bespoke referee course for prisons. Four pilot prisons have been identified to deliver this groundbreaking intervention, with the first course due to start in late summer at HMP Lancaster Farms, as my hon. Friend said. We all recognise the power of sport and we are determined to harness it.
Mr Speaker: David Dein is inspirational on this matter, and on many others, as I know from hearing from him directly on this important subject. He also has the great merit of being an Arsenal fan and a former vice-chairman of the club, as the hon. Gentleman is aware.

Ellie Reeves (Lewisham West and Penge) (Lab): Last year’s review of sport in prisons shows that reoffending rates were markedly lower among those who had participated in sports-based resettlement programmes than among those who had not, but the report noted a distinct lack of engagement in physical activity among women in prison. What steps will the Minister take to implement Professor Meek’s recommendation of a specific physical activity strategy for women, and what incentives will the Government provide to sports clubs to get involved with rehabilitation schemes?

Edward Argar: The hon. Lady is absolutely right. Our view is that sport can play a crucial role in rehabilitation and resettlement not just for male prisoners but for all prisoners, irrespective of gender. I went to see David Dein in HMP Downview, where we introduced the twinning project in a female prison for the first time, yielding fantastic results. We are very keen on the idea and are continuing to work with Jason Swettenham, the director in the Prison Service with responsibility for the project, to work within the custodial estate and with community organisations focused on engaging women in sport. They are absolutely integral to what we are trying to do.

Stephen Crabb (Preseli Pembrokeshire) (Con): If the Minister is not already aware of it, may I encourage him to look at the eight-week programme being run at Feltham young offenders institution by the Saracens Sport Foundation, which is obviously linked to the European club rugby champions? It has helped to reduce reoffending rates among participants by more than half by using classroom sessions and mentoring and by focusing on the values of sport and what they can bring.

Edward Argar: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. I do not know if he is a clairvoyant, but if I recall my diary correctly I am due to visit Saracens at Feltham next week.

Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): Will the Minister broker arrangements with our primary sporting clubs—rugby, football and cricket—to make sure they have the opportunity to pair up with a prison, so that there is a relationship that can evolve over time? Does he think that is a good idea?

Edward Argar: I do think that is an excellent idea, which is exactly the principle behind the twinning project and exactly what is happening on the ground. The project is expanding to include more and more prisons. I have focused, given the nature of the question, on football, but the hon. Gentleman is right to highlight rugby, and from my perspective cricket is always a winner. He is absolutely right. The model is there with the twinning project and we want it to continue to expand.

Privately Run Prisons

Mohammad Yasin (Bedford) (Lab): What is his policy on privately run prisons.

The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice (Mr David Gauke): The Government remain committed to a role for the private sector in operating custodial services. The sector has an important role to play and currently runs some high-performing prisons as part of a decent and secure prison estate.

Mohammad Yasin: Publicly run HMP Bedford has been deprived of adequate funding, while public investment has been given to the notorious blacklisting construction firm Kier to build a new supersized prison nearby in Wellingborough, which will be handed straight to the private sector to run. Will the Minister explain why the public sector was banned from bidding for the new prison?

Mr Gauke: We believe in a balanced estate—the last prison built was HMP Berwyn, which is in the public sector—to maintain a mix of providers. We wanted to ensure that the next two were in the private sector.

Richard Burgon (Leeds East) (Lab): I would like to take this opportunity to congratulate the new Ministers on their appointment.

I am sure everyone across the House was deeply concerned by new research showing that, when comparing like with like, private male local prisons have 42% more assaults than their public equivalents. That is especially worrying given that the Government are planning to build a new generation of prisons run for profit. I am sure the Secretary of State would not wish to be deemed an ideologue who would back private prisons even if they were more dangerous. Before proceeding with those new private prisons, will he back an independent review of safety and overcrowding in private prisons to ensure that corners are not being cut to maximise profits?

Mr Gauke: The reality is that there are many very successful private prisons where the level of violence is lower than average. Let me give the hon. Gentleman an example. HMP Altcourse in Liverpool has low levels of violence compared with a typical category B local prison, including the public sector category B local prison in the same city where we have faced significant difficulties with violence. It is hard to compare one set of prisons against another on a like-for-like basis. I do not accept the analysis the hon. Gentleman sets out, and I do believe we need to have a mixed sector.

Prison and Probation Officers: Gross Misconduct Charges

Laura Pidcock (North West Durham) (Lab): What steps he is taking to improve legal protections for prison and probation officers facing charges of gross misconduct.

The Minister of State, Ministry of Justice (Robert Buckland): The existing process is an internal employment process and is compliant with both employment law and ACAS best practice. It exists to identify where misconduct has occurred and to hold individuals to account.
By holding all prison and probation officers to the high standard we expect, we protect the reputation of the entire service.

Laura Pidcock: Napo has called for the scapegoating of probation officers to end, especially with the reviewing of cases that have already been covered by a review. It insists that senior managers are driven by a desire to be seen to be doing something rather than to deal with the root cause, which is the unbearable workload pressures caused by mass vacancies. Does the Minister agree that the probation service should take responsibility for structural failures leading to serious further offences, rather than hanging its workers out to dry?

Robert Buckland: The hon. Lady makes a very proper point, and I pay tribute to the probation officers I have worked with over many years. They are dedicated public servants who use their professional judgment and skill to help assess risk, which is an onerous task. I do not approve of scapegoating. I expect the service to support probation officers who are under pressure, but for cases where there needs to be an investigation, due process then has to take place.

Probation Supervision: Short Sentences

8. Victoria Prentis (Banbury) (Con): If he will make it his policy to end the requirement for 12 months of probation supervision for people with sentences of less than 12 months. [911113]

The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice (Mr David Gauke): It is absolutely vital that prisoners get the support they need after release to turn their lives around. It would be premature to reverse reforms that, for the first time, saw those released on short sentences supervised after release, with a period dedicated solely to rehabilitation. We have already looked at ways of making that process more proportionate, but as my hon. Friend will know, I want to look at the broader question of short sentences and measures that actually serve to reduce reoffending.

Victoria Prentis: If I may trespass for one moment on your good will, Mr Speaker, given the previous question, perhaps you would like to join me in congratulating the Nacro winners, who are in the Public Gallery at the moment and who are about to join me for tea in the Pugin Room—where are they? They are putting their hands up so they can be congratulated by all of us in the House today, who appreciate what probation staff and those who work with prisoners do for us.

Does the Secretary of State agree that we should put real resource into alternatives to custody, so that we can end the cycle of reoffending and stop all our constituents from suffering from further crime?

Mr Gauke: I join in the congratulations to the prize winners in the Gallery and welcome them to the House of Commons.

I agree with my hon. Friend about the importance of alternatives to custody, and I am keen to ensure that we make greater use of curfews, exclusion zones and new ways in which we can restrict offenders in the community in a way that can be more effective in reducing future reoffending.

17. [911122] Ian C. Lucas (Wrexham) (Lab): Failings in the probation system were found by the probation service to have contributed to the death of my constituent, Nicholas Churton, who was murdered, but unfortunately, the content of the report has not been made available either to me or to his family. Will the Department—either the Secretary of State or the new Minister responsible for probation and prisons, the hon. and learned Member for South Swindon (Robert Buckland)—meet me to discuss how we can have an open system that looks to improve when errors have occurred?

Mr Gauke: I know that the new Minister—let me take this opportunity to welcome him to his post—would be delighted to meet the hon. Gentleman.

19. [911124] Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): Can the Secretary of State reassure Members that underperforming companies involved in probation—for example, G4S and Sodexo—will not be allowed in future to apply for any of the new contracts that the Government are going to issue shortly?

Mr Gauke: We will look at the merits of all the bidders for those new contracts, but I am not going to draw up any red lines today. The bids will need to be looked at in their totality.

Management of Offenders: Local Authorities and PCCs

9. Alex Burghart (Brentwood and Ongar) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to work with (a) local authorities and (b) Police and Crime Commissioners in the management of offenders. [911114]

10. Craig Tracey (North Warwickshire) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to work with (a) local authorities and (b) Police and Crime Commissioners in the management of offenders. [911115]

The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice (Mr David Gauke): We want to strengthen partnership working between probation and local partners, including local authorities and police and crime commissioners, and the future probation model announced on 16 May will better enable this with a new regional structure led by regional directors responsible for the delivery and commissioning of probation services. They will work with local partners to identify shared priorities and co-commission services that will better support the management of offenders in the community.

Alex Burghart: Will the Secretary of State commit to exploring co-commissioning so that probation can leverage in wider funding and serve common needs?

Mr Gauke: The short answer is yes. Our plan is to create a dynamic framework for the commissioning of resettlement and rehabilitative intervention opportunities. To complement this, we will ring-fence £20 million a year in an innovation fund to attract match funding from other Departments and commissioning bodies for innovative cross-cutting approaches.
Craig Tracey: Does the Secretary of State agree that the transforming rehabilitation reforms had the very sensible goal of reducing reoffending by extending supervision to a group of offenders who previously did not have it?

Mr Gauke: Yes, I do think that is a very sensible goal, and sometimes that point has been missed in the debate about the transforming rehabilitation programme. My view is that we need to build on those reforms, and that is why on 16 May I outlined the changes we were making. My hon. Friend is right that we need to be ambitious and provide coverage for as many ex-offenders as possible.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): I am not sure whether the Secretary of State has had a chance yet to see the report published this morning by Crest Advisory on the management of women offenders. It suggests that police and crime commissioners should develop gender-informed alternatives to cautions and thereby keep women out of the criminal justice system. Will he consider that recommendation and the others in the report, and would he or one of his ministerial colleagues be willing to meet me and representatives of Crest to discuss it?

Mr Gauke: I confess I have not had an opportunity yet to read the report published this morning, but from what the hon. Lady says it appears to go in a similar direction to the female offenders strategy I set out last year. I know that the Under-Secretary of State for Justice, my hon. Friend the Member for Charnwood (Edward Argar), would be delighted to meet her to discuss the matter further.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): I also congratulate the new Ministers on their appointment.

Short sentences target the most vulnerable offenders, especially women, with 75% of all women offenders sentenced to less than a year going on to reoffend. Has the Secretary of State made an assessment of the impact of short prison sentences on offenders and communities?

Mr Gauke: Indeed I am concerned about the impact of short sentences, not just on those who receive them but on society as a whole, because if they are ineffective in reducing reoffending, we are not doing society a favour and we are not reducing crime in the way we want to. As I said a moment ago, we set out our approach in the female offenders strategy—there is a case for looking at alternatives to custody for less serious offences. As a whole, I am ambitious to reduce the use of short sentences, which I do not see as being effective in reducing crime.

Short Sentences

11. Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): What his Department’s policy is on short sentences.

That said, we must ensure that the public and the judiciary can have confidence in effective community orders that address offenders’ behaviour, meet their mental health and alcohol or drug misuse needs and provide reparation for the benefit of the wider community.

Gavin Newlands: Before his promotion—potentially to Prime Minister—the right hon. Member for Penrith and The Border (Rory Stewart) said:

“We have a lot to learn from Scotland, specifically on community sentences, and indeed we will be looking at what more we can do to emphasise that a custodial sentence in the short term should be a final resort.”—[Official Report, 24 April 2018; Vol. 639, c. 714-15.] Given the Secretary of State’s answer just now, will he ensure that there is a continuity of approach within the new ministerial team in the MOJ?

Mr Gauke: I am sure that there will be; I would certainly expect that to be the case. One thing that we should learn from Scotland is that we need to ensure that community sentences are not ignored, and that drug treatment orders are completed. I know that that has been an issue in relation to some of the reforms in Scotland, and we need to learn from it, because if we are going to make these reforms we must ensure that community sentences are working properly.

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): The latest generation of GPS tags can monitor the specific movements of offenders rather than simply enforcing home curfews. Does my right hon. Friend agree that that gives courts a powerful tool to punish offenders in the community while keeping victims safe, as an alternative to short sentences?

Mr Gauke: I very much agree with that. I can tell the House that I wore a GPS tag for a couple of days, and was subsequently able to be informed of all my movements for the period concerned: precisely where I had been, and when. Thankfully I had not been up to no good, but it was a demonstration of how accurate and effective those tags can be. I believe that they have considerable potential for reassuring the public about community sentences, and about our ability to track those who might pose a risk to the community.

Mr Speaker: The Secretary of State’s moral probity was never in doubt for a moment.

Jo Stevens (Cardiff Central) (Lab): The Secretary of State will know about the terrible legacy of the imprisonment for public protection sentence, and its negative impact on both reoffending and re-incarceration. Will he meet me, and my constituent whose son received an IPP sentence, to discuss ideas for reform of the licence that applies?

Mr Gauke: The challenge of IPP cases is that the Parole Board must satisfy itself that those who have been sentenced to IPPs no longer pose a risk to society. That can be very difficult, and in many cases there are risks to society, so we must be cautious and ensure that we protect the public. I know that the Minister responds for prisons and probation, my hon. and learned Friend the Member for South Swindon (Robert Buckland), would be happy to meet the hon. Lady.
Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): It is now well recognised that a system that pushes offenders through a revolving door of short prison sentences simply does not work. Notwithstanding the riders expressed by the Secretary of State a moment ago, the fact is that the Justice Committee, as well as his Government, have recognised that the system in Scotland is working. The Committee’s recent report recommended that the UK Government follow Scotland’s approach of a presumption against short sentences. Will the Secretary of State commit himself to introducing such a presumption in England and Wales?

Mr Gauke: I hope to be able to say more about the details of what we want to do in the not too distant future, but in respect of the approach that is being taken in Scotland, it is worth bearing in mind that it is already the case in England that a custodial sentence should be pursued only as a last resort, so there is already something approaching a presumption in the English system. I am interested in seeing whether we could go further than that, but I welcome the hon. and learned Lady’s approach—our shared approach, I think—of scepticism about the effectiveness of short sentences.

Joanna Cherry: As someone who worked in the criminal justice system in Scotland for 20 years before coming to the House, I can assure the Secretary of State that the idea that a custodial sentence should be a last resort existed in Scotland before the presumption against short sentences, so that is an additional presumption.

One of the bodies that gave evidence to the Justice Committee pointed out that diverting those who have been identified as low-risk offenders “from short custodial sentences to suspended custodial sentences could reduce the prison population” in England and Wales by about 3,000 places. Does the Secretary of State agree that the presumption against short sentences in Scotland can help to reduce the prison population, and could do so if introduced south of the border?

Mr Gauke: As I have said, I hope to say more about the approach we want to take, but there is a case that an approach on short sentences along the lines that I have discussed may reduce the prison population, but the principal purpose is not reducing the prison population. It will not be massively dramatic, but I believe it will help to reduce reoffending. That is the big prize, rather than what are likely to be relatively marginal changes to the prison population.

Legal Aid Reform

12. Charlie Elphicke (Dover) (Con): What steps the Government is taking to reform the provision of legal aid.

Charlie Elphicke: I congratulate my hon. Friend on his new position and his excellent answer. Many are concerned that reductions in legal aid from 2000 onwards have gone too far, meaning that people struggle to get access to justice. Does he agree that the time has come better to fund legal aid, rethink the abolition of conditional fee agreements and ensure the court system as a whole is funded, to make sure we uphold the rule of law?

Paul Maynard: My hon. Friend is clearly easily pleased by my answers. Last year we spent £1.6 billion alone on legal aid, and that will continue. Our legal support action plan includes such measures as reviewing the means test for legal aid and the criminal legal aid fee scheme, so we constantly look to ensure the level of support is correct and appropriate.

Ruth George (High Peak) (Lab): The role of families at inquests is one of the most distressing that they come across. In February the Government said they would look into further options for the funding of legal support for families at inquests where the state has state-funded representation. What progress has the Department made that I can report back to my constituents who have suffered?

Paul Maynard: The hon. Lady makes a very fair point, and I am concerned about that myself. There has to be equality of arms in the courtroom and inquests when the state is represented—when the state has a duty of care towards individuals. We are looking into this topic; I have nothing to report at present but I constantly engage with my officials on it. I am interested in it myself and would be happy to meet the hon. Lady if she wishes to share her ideas.

22. [911128] Mr Marcus Fysh (Yeovil) (Con): What opportunities are there for reforming effective access to justice, such as through legal aid and mediation, as a result of leaving the EU and not being subject to the charter of fundamental rights?

Paul Maynard: My hon. Friend alights on the pertinent point that not all legal support needs to come in the form of legal aid at the point at which a case reaches a court. Legal support can take many forms and shapes. Indeed, it might consist of a very early conversation to inform someone that their case has no merit and is best dealt with through mediation or some other means in the community.

Richard Burgon (Leeds East) (Lab): Two years ago, Taylor Alice Williams died while she was supposed to be under the care of the state in a secure children’s home. Her bereaved mother, who is unable to work due to a disability, was recently told she would have to contribute thousands of pounds for legal representation at the inquest into her daughter’s death. Families should not be forced to mount press campaigns to get the legal aid they deserve.

There are too many families in this desperate situation. The Government’s own review estimates that 500 families a year lose a loved one in custody or state detention leading to an inquest. Does the Secretary of State regret his recent decision to refuse those families legal aid, and will he revise the decision?
Paul Maynard: Inquests should always have bereaved families at the heart of the process, and legal aid decisions need to be considered in that light. Our recent review underlined the importance of preserving an inquisitorial, as opposed to adversarial, approach, meaning there ought to be less need for lawyers. None the less, as Dame Elish Angiolini’s report stressed, while the state has a duty of care there is a case for reviewing the thresholds and criteria appropriate for legal aid entitlement as part of a wider review into legal aid entitlement.

Sexual Offences Act 2003: Definition of Positions of Trust

13. Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): If he will make it his policy to include in the definition of positions of trust in the Sexual Offences Act 2003 (a) driving instructors, (b) sports coaches and (c) other adults working with children in extra-curricular activities.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Paul Maynard): I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his question. Protecting children from the scourge of sexual abuse in all its forms is a top priority for the Government. The law is clear: all sexual activity with someone under the age of 16 is illegal and all non-consensual activity is also illegal. However, the Government recognise that there are concerns about those who might abuse their position of power over a 16 or 17-year-old to pressure them into engaging in a sexual relationship. This is why we are working closely with colleagues across Government to take forward a review of the existing law to check that it is working effectively and protecting young people.

Richard Graham: I am grateful to the Minister for his reply, but the truth is that there have been some harrowing situations in which young women in particular, although not exclusively, have been groomed by manipulative coaches, sports instructors or driving instructors who are in a position of care. For some time, the Government have said that they will look at this closely, but have tended to fall back on the line that once people are over 16 there is not much they can do. May I urge the Minister to look at this situation closely? The NSPCC campaign is a good place to start. Will he agree to meet me and representatives of the NSPCC to discuss this issue?

Paul Maynard: I would be happy to meet my hon. Friend and Peter Wanless from the NSPCC. My hon. Friend rightly makes a number of points that need to be borne in mind. We have to give an element of consideration to individuals who are in a position of responsibility in relation to young people with the degree of vulnerability. There is always a balance to be struck so that we do not criminalise behaviour that is currently legal, and the age of consent remains at 16.

Sarah Champion (Rotherham) (Lab): People who prey on children often deliberately get themselves into a position of trust, and they know and exploit this legal loophole, as I believe the Minister is aware. Rather than simply carrying out a review, will he do what the previous sports Minister agreed to do, which is to change the law?

Paul Maynard: This is why we are having a review to ensure that we understand whether the law is working correctly and young people are being protected. I understand the points being made about sports coaches, driving examiners and many others, which is why I am keen to see the results of the review.

Leaving the EU: Assessment of Implications

16. Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): What recent assessment he has made of the implications for his Department’s policies of the UK leaving the EU.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Paul Maynard): The Government continue to believe that leaving with a deal is the best outcome for the UK. For my Department, this means seeking a new agreement on civil digital co-operation as well as a future security partnership that protects our shared law enforcement and criminal justice capabilities.

Patrick Grady: The Minister is doing a great job at the Dispatch Box. Does he agree with the Home Affairs Committee that, in the event of no deal, being forced to rely on the 1957 convention on extradition rather than the European arrest warrant would be a “catastrophic outcome”? Does he therefore agree that the next Prime Minister, whoever that might be, should rule out the UK crashing out of Europe without a deal?

Paul Maynard: We have always made it clear that we do not seek a no deal. We have also made it clear that any future security partnership with the EU would have to include protecting our shared law enforcement elements as well as the criminal justice capabilities. If this can technically be done and it is lawful, there is no reason why it should be left out of any future security agreement.

Prison Officer Recruitment

18. Eddie Hughes (Walsall North) (Con): What recent progress his Department has made on recruiting 2,500 new prison officers.

The Minister of State, Ministry of Justice (Robert Buckland): Our target to recruit an additional 2,500 officers was successfully achieved in the first quarter of last year, ahead of schedule. From October 2016 to 31 March this year, there was an increase of 4,675 full-time equivalent prison officers.

Eddie Hughes: I welcome that increase in the number of prison officers. What progress has been made with the key worker scheme in prisons?

Robert Buckland: The key worker scheme is an important part of improving support for prisoners, leading to safer prisons. That work has begun in all 92 prisons in the male closed estate, and 66 of them have completed implementation activities and started to deliver key work. Only last week I spoke to prisoners in two of those prisons who are already receiving the benefits of that interaction.
Topical Questions

T1. [911129] Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

Mr Gauke: The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice (Mr David Gauke): On 28 May, we announced changes to the release on temporary licence—ROTLM—rules, which will allow prisoners to be considered for temporary release earlier. This will provide more opportunities for them to work and train with employers while serving their sentence and increase their chances of securing an immediate job on release. Research shows that time spent on ROTL working in the community or rebuilding family and community ties before release significantly reduces a prisoner’s likelihood of reoffending. ROTL is permitted only after a rigorous risk assessment, and the compliance rate is over 99%. Any non-compliance is dealt with robustly.

Luke Pollard: I have a lot of time for the Justice Ministers, but will the Secretary of State explain why there are no women in his ministerial team?

Mr Gauke: It is not for the Secretary of State to appoint his ministerial team, but I am delighted to welcome some strong new team members. They replace two outstanding Ministers who have gone on to higher and, I hope, greater things.

T6. [911134] Steve Double (St Austell and Newquay) (Con): A recent survey found that many divorced or separated fathers are being prevented from staying in touch with their children despite indirect contact orders from the courts. What steps are the Government taking to ensure that fathers can have regular and meaningful contact with their children in such cases?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Paul Maynard): I am grateful for that question, and I am genuinely sympathetic towards those in such situations. Family breakdown always takes a toll on those involved, whether parents or children, but the child’s welfare is paramount in court decisions about their upbringing. The law remains gender-neutral and presumes that a parent’s involvement in a child’s life is beneficial unless there is evidence to the contrary.

Richard Burgon (Leeds East) (Lab): I recently met Donna Mooney, the sister of Tommy Nicol, who sadly took his own life in prison while serving an imprisonment for public protection sentence. I am sure that the Secretary of State will also want to meet her soon. It is a cause of regret that IPPs were ever introduced; their Labour author now acknowledges that. They were not reserved for the most serious of offences, too often effectively becoming a life sentence for those who had committed minor crimes. Does the Secretary of State agree that much more needs to be done to provide opportunities for people who are now away over their short IPP tariffs to prove that they no longer pose a risk to the public?

Mr Gauke: It was right that the coalition Government abolished IPPs, which were brought in by the previous Labour Government, and there is consensus that that was the right thing to do. The difficulty is that the Parole Board now assesses in each case whether someone with an IPP sentence would be a risk to society, and the board must obviously ensure that public protection is put first. It is also right that we seek to do everything we can to rehabilitate IPP prisoners so that they can be released into the community.

T7. [911135] Mr John Whittingdale (Maldon) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that the separation of powers is an important element of our constitution, and that as a general rule the involvement of the courts in matters of political argument or debate may threaten that principle and create a dangerous precedent?

Mr Gauke: This country has a robust tradition of political free speech, and the electorate can and should hold politicians to account. We also have a robust tradition of the courts being capable of determining whether a case is meritorious or unmeritorious.

T2. [911136] Bambos Charalambous (Enfield, Southgate) (Lab): Since 2011, there has been a huge rise in the number of parents facing child custody cases without legal representation. Will the Minister explain why his Government’s review of damaging Conservative cuts to legal aid did not address that matter?

Paul Maynard: I think it is because that is unfair. We are looking carefully at how we manage demand in the family justice system. We are ensuring that legal support is offered within the family courts, and that can take many forms, not just legal aid. For example, the personal support unit now operates in 23 courts across 18 cities, so we are looking to make sure that the right support is given to those in the family courts at the right point in the legal process.

T8. [911137] Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con): My Harlow constituent waited eight hours in a sexual assault referral centre, unable to wash and in a state of emotional distress, after a man attempted to rape her. What steps is the Ministry of Justice taking to ensure that sexual assault referral centres are properly staffed to assist survivors of sexual assault and reduce waiting times?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Edward Argar): My right hon. Friend makes an important point. SARCs fall under the remit of the Department of Health and Social Care, but NHS England commissioned a report last year to assess the current state and future needs of the SARC workforce. Alongside SARCs and other victim support services, I have increased the funding available to rape and sexual violence support services by 10%, moving the funding from an annual to a three-year cycle.

T3. [911138] Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): Last month the Scottish Government raised the age of criminal responsibility to 12 years, which should ensure that young children are not left with criminal records that follow them into adulthood. In England, however, the age of criminal responsibility is 10 years. Will the Government consider following the Scottish Government’s approach?
Mr Gauke: We have no plans at present, but I am conscious that England’s age of criminal responsibility is lower than in most western countries. I am sure this matter will be kept under review.

T9. [911137] Alan Mak (Havant) (Con): Having worked with his predecessor, it is clear to me that new technology in prisons can help with rehabilitation, so what plans does my hon. and learned Friend have in this area?

The Minister of State, Ministry of Justice (Robert Buckland): My hon. Friend is right to emphasise the importance of technology in rehabilitation, which is why in-cell telephones have now been rolled out to 18 prisons and work is under way to deliver them to a further 30 prisons by March 2020. The introduction of basic computers, with the necessary controls, can allow prisoners to start managing some of their day-to-day tasks ahead of potential release.

Edward Argar: As I mentioned in response to a previous question, I have increased by 10% the funding available to rape and sexual violence support services. The hon. Gentleman highlights a specific case, and I would be delighted to meet him to discuss it.

Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): Both as a constituency MP and when I look at the media, I am concerned by increasing reports of cases being adjourned, often at the last minute, for the lack of a judge being available, particularly in the Crown and county courts. At the same time, courtrooms sit empty and Her Majesty’s Courts and Tribunals Service is not advertising vacancies for recorders—part-time judges who are willing and able to fill those vacancies. Will the Minister urgently investigate what appears to be a lack of joined-up government by HMCTS?

Paul Maynard: I am very aware of this issue, which I have been discussing with various people at the top end of HMCTS. It is important that we recruit sufficient judges, on which we need to do better. I will happily discuss it with my hon. Friend and provide a fuller answer when I appear before his Select Committee next week.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): In addition to reviewing the Sexual Offences Act 2003, as raised by the hon. Member for Gloucester (Richard Graham), will the Minister look at families who host international students and who are put in a position of trust over young people?

Mr Gauke: I pay tribute to my hon. Friend, and I am more than happy to visit Her Majesty’s Prison Leyhill not just to look at that specific issue but to see the conditions in that category B prison for myself.

Robert Buckland: I am grateful to my hon. Friend, and I am more than happy to visit Her Majesty’s Prison Leyhill not just to look at that specific issue but to see the conditions in that category B prison for myself.

Edward Argar: The hon. Lady raises an important point. She alludes to the fact that this falls more directly within the remit of the Attorney General’s office but, of course, it cuts across a number of Departments. I have already had a number of meetings with my opposite number in the Home Office and with my new colleague, the prisons Minister, when he was Solicitor General. I look forward to further such meetings to get to the bottom of exactly what the hon. Lady highlights.

Luke Hall (Thornbury and Yate) (Con): HMP Leyhill is a category B prison in south Gloucestershire. The number of absconded is reducing year on year, but there remains significant concern in the community following an incident last year involving a school just half a mile away. Will the prisons Minister be good enough to visit south Gloucestershire to see this prison and to talk about the emergency mechanisms that need to be put in place?

Mr Gauke: We have no plans at present, but I am conscious that England’s age of criminal responsibility is lower than in most western countries. I am sure this matter will be kept under review.

Edward Argar: The hon. Gentleman highlights a specific case, and I would be delighted to meet him to discuss it.

Mr Gauke: I pay tribute to my hon. Friend, who has taken up this issue tirelessly. As he knows, the Parole Board will release a life sentence prisoner only when, in its view, it is no longer necessary on the grounds of public protection for a prisoner to remain in custody. In making its determination, the board will consider reports from those who manage the prisoner and have assessed the risk of harm he presents. The board will also consider all relevant evidence of the prisoner’s risk of harm, and if my hon. Friend has such evidence I am sure it will be listened to closely. We will ensure that it is fully considered for inclusion in the dossier of reports given to the Parole Board.

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): My constituency is colossal—the second biggest in the UK—and the cost of travel to courts is a big issue. I plead with the Government to look at legal aid with a view to changing it to reflect the hardship that some of my constituents suffer from in paying the cost of getting to court.
Paul Maynard: I gently advise the hon. Gentleman that in his constituency that would be a matter for the Scottish Government. Beyond that, I recognise that it is an issue across the country. We wish to look at that in our legal services action plan to make sure that, if people are struggling to access justice, we have a new set of guidelines on how we keep open various courts and tribunals that will help to make sure that our courts remain as accessible as possible to as many people as possible.
EU Parliament Elections: Denial of Votes

3.37 pm

Cat Smith (Lancaster and Fleetwood) (Lab) (Urgent Question): To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office if he will make a statement on why non-UK EU citizens were denied their right to vote in the European parliamentary elections.

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Kevin Foster): The Government took all the legal steps necessary to prepare for the European parliamentary elections and put in place all the necessary legislative and funding elements to enable returning officers to make their preparations. We worked with returning officers, the Electoral Commission and other agencies, such as the Society of Local Authority Chief Executives and Senior Managers and the Association of Electoral Administrators, to support the smooth running of the polls. The Government are greatly appreciative of electoral administrators’ hard work inside and outside election periods, which resulted in a higher turnout than for previous European parliamentary elections.

Electoral registration officers are under a statutory duty to ensure that people who are eligible to vote in elections have the opportunity to do so. For the recent European Parliament elections—as for all previous such elections—that included making sure that EU citizens who are resident in the UK and registered to vote in local elections were made aware that they needed to complete a voter registration and declaration form, commonly referred to as a UC1 or EC6, so they could vote in the UK. The Electoral Commission supported EROs in this and encouraged them to take additional steps to raise awareness of this requirement locally, through social media channels and other means.

The UC1 form implements a requirement under EU law. EU Council directive 93/109/EC requires all member states to send the details of any EU citizens’ declarations to the state they are a citizen of, “sufficiently in advance of polling day”, to ensure that an EU citizen does not vote twice in the same European parliamentary election. That is not a new requirement and has been in place for previous European parliamentary elections. Similar provision applies to UK citizens living in other EU member states. The UC1 form was accessible on the websites of the Electoral Commission, local authorities and Your Vote Matters.

On 5 April, the Electoral Commission published guidance for local returning officers and EROs on the upcoming European parliamentary elections. In it, the Electoral Commission reminded EROs to prepare and issue UC1 forms to EU citizens on the electoral register. On 3 May, the Electoral Commission published guidance advising EU citizens to avoid registering to vote using unofficial registration sites. The guidance further stated: “Any EU citizen who wants to vote in the European Parliamentary election in the UK must also print, complete and return a declaration form stating that they will only vote in the UK.”

The guidance also included a link to the Your Vote Matters website, where the form could be downloaded.

Cat Smith: The numbers of non-UK EU citizens who were reportedly denied a vote in the European elections should be a source of shame for the Government. We are talking about people who live and work here and who contribute to our communities, yet for the past three years they have been insulted, exploited, asked to apply to stay in their own homes and now denied a voice in an election that has massive implications for their futures. Have the Government learned nothing from the Windrush scandal about the consequences of shutting citizens out of public life?

After the previous set of European elections, the Electoral Commission warned that we needed to streamline the two-step registration process, like other European countries have done. Why did the Government refuse to listen? They buried their head in the sand in respect of the elections, even at the eleventh hour when it was clear that the House was not going to pass their botched Brexit deal. The Opposition repeatedly warned that EU nationals were not given enough time and notice. We put forward reasonable requests that could have been adopted to mitigate the risks, such as ensuring that EU citizens were handed a copy of the form when they voted in local elections and extending the deadline by a week to ensure that the forms could be returned.

What was the Government’s response? It was to tell EU citizens to vote in their own country. Not only did that add to the anger and sense of exclusion that many felt, but it was asking people to register to vote in a country that they may not have lived in for decades and where voting registration may well have closed. Does the Minister acknowledge how insulting that was? Will he apologise to those affected? Campaign groups have already raised more than £40,000 to fund a legal challenge; have the Government assessed whether their actions were compliant with the law? The failure to act made this democratic disaster sadly inevitable. In the light of the overwhelming evidence, will the Government conduct a full and urgent investigation?

Kevin Foster: We have to be clear that the process was exactly the same as what was required back in 2014 and 2009. The legal structure for how the vote takes place has not changed.

On the deadlines referred to, I can remember having a discussion with the shadow Minister about whether it would be possible to change the registration date, but that would have run up against the clear requirement that we have to share the declarations “sufficiently in advance of polling day”.

That means sharing them in advance of polling day, not just a day or two before, to allow registers to be completed in home nation states. To be clear, this process has been in place for some years.

I accept the point that obviously people did not necessarily expect the EU elections to happen, given the result of the referendum and the fact that 80% of the people who voted in 2017 did so for parties that had pledged to respect the referendum result—something we have not seen much evidence of on the Opposition Benches. The Electoral Commission will review the European elections, as it reviews any other electoral event, and will look into any issues raised. As a responsible Government, we will of course consider carefully what the Electoral Commission says.
Mrs Maria Miller (Basingstoke) (Con): I thank the Minister for his statement.

I was contacted by a handful of my constituents about this issue. My local authority has confirmed that the relevant paperwork was sent out entirely in accordance with the rules on 12 April, to be returned by 7 May. Several thousand of those forms were returned, so the process was clearly working, but for a handful of people there seems to have been some confusion. Will the Minister confirm from the Dispatch Box that he will look carefully at the Electoral Commission’s report on the election, to understand why that group of people found it so difficult to follow the rules in this instance?

Kevin Foster: I thank my right hon. Friend for her question. I am pleased to hear her experience, which is that thousands did return the declaration and were able to take part. We will of course listen very carefully to what the Electoral Commission has to say in its review of the European parliamentary elections. The turnout did go up. In fact it was much, much higher than it was in 1999, which is the last time we had stand-alone European elections, so, again, that gives us some confidence in the system. None the less, we will certainly consider very carefully the points that the Electoral Commission brings forward and look at whether any changes are required.

Tommy Sheppard (Edinburgh East) (SNP): Whether by accident or design, this Government have presided over the disenfranchisement of hundreds of thousands of our neighbours and friends who wanted to vote in that election but were unable to do so. Frankly, the Minister’s complacency here today is simply compounding the problem. He acts as if this were some sort of surprise. Back in 2014, many people told the Cabinet Office that the system then was inadequate. The Electoral Commission itself called for a review of the UC1 system. Therefore, given the additional dubiety and uncertainty created by this Government about the fact that these elections would take place this year, surely it must have been obvious that something needed to be done in order to improve the situation. At any stage did Ministers approach the European authorities to get a dispensation from the regulations in order to cope with the situation in the United Kingdom? At any stage did Ministers consider bringing forward a statutory instrument to this House in order to truncate the existing system for filling in the UC1 form? Will the Minister promise that there will be a full and public investigation into this debacle?

Kevin Foster: Let me be clear: the Council directive is a piece of EU law. It is not something from which we can seek derogations or exemptions. I know that, normally, those on the Scottish National party Benches are very keen to see European law there and fully complied with. This is about an election across all 28 member states for one Parliament; this is not about a uniquely British election.

With regard to looking at the options open to us, we did briefly ask for official advice, but on whether it would be possible to consider a statutory instrument, I have to say that that rubs up against our need to implement that exact expression of being such as to be in advance of polling day. Given that our registration deadline was 7 May—roughly two weeks before—it is hard to see how we could move much more beyond that date. As for how we will look at this matter, the Electoral Commission will comply with its statutory duty to conduct a review of how the elections were conducted. It is a body that has solid election knowledge, is appointed independently and is not under the control of Government. We can all think of views that the Electoral Commission has expressed that we have either loved or loathed. That is our best option. We will therefore carefully consider what conclusions it brings back.

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): The Minister does not appear to appreciate the Government’s responsibility for this mess. It was not until Tuesday 7 May that the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster said that the UK would definitely be taking part in the European elections. As the Minister has just admitted, Tuesday 7 May was also the closing date for the receipt of UC1 forms. Given that the Government must have known since 11 April, which was the date on which the EU granted us a further extension to 31 October, that we would be taking part in these European elections, why did it take the Government from 11 April to 7 May to confirm that fact? Earlier confirmation would have allowed more EU citizens to get their UC1 forms in on time, and they would therefore not have been denied the right to vote on 23 May.

Kevin Foster: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his question. As I said in my earlier answer, it was on 5 April that the Electoral Commission published guidance for local returning officers and ER Os, and it was on 8 April that my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster laid the necessary orders for the poll. There was no restriction on submitting a UC1 application before those dates. There was no need to wait until it was completely confirmed to submit that form. As has been said, a number of EU citizens who are resident in this country made arrangements to vote in this election in the state of which they are a citizen. It is therefore clear that there was no undue delay and that advice was pushed out. By 3 May, there was clear advice published by the Electoral Commission, which has the primary role in promoting how citizens use their electoral rights in this country.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): We see shocking complacency from the Minister and a complete denial of any Government responsibility for this shambles. A number of MPs—me included—raised these concerns in advance of the election, saying that EU citizens were going to be disenfranchised. And sure enough they were, as they were in the EU referendum. Is the Minister aware of legal advice that says that the use of the UC1 form is discriminatory, and will he—he has not yet answered this question—support calls for an inquiry into this shambles and the Government’s role in it?

Kevin Foster: The suggestion that the UC1 form, which has been used in a number of European elections, is now discriminatory is absolutely for the birds. It is a process that we have used for other elections and it is part of implementing a requirement under European law. The Liberal Democrats cannot say that they like the European Union’s laws one day and then demand that we should just ignore them the next, when it suits them. It is clear that the Council directive requires us to complete declarations and to send them sufficiently in advance of polling day.
Tom Brake indicated dissent.

Kevin Foster: The right hon. Gentleman may shake his head and dislike what I am saying, but that is the wording of the legislation. The Electoral Commission will conduct a full review, and I look forward to reading and receiving its conclusions.

Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab): The Minister said—once again, erroneously—that 80% of voters in the referendum voted for parties that supported a Tory Brexit. He knows that to be completely wrong. What he omitted to say was that the majority of voters who voted in the European elections voted for parties who want another referendum and want to remain in the European Union. The Minister was warned repeatedly about this issue in this House and outside it, yet we all have examples of constituents who came up to us in desperation on election day, having done all the right things but having had their names crossed out when they arrived at the polling station. It is an absolute scandal. Does this not reveal a Government who did not investigate properly, the proven subversion and lawbreaking in the referendum, and who have absolutely no interest in the integrity of our democratic process? The Minister should resign.

Kevin Foster: Oh dear; well, I will not thank the right hon. Gentleman for that question. The reality is that we have an independent Electoral Commission and an independent police force which does not—and should not—operate under political guidance. Despite the right hon. Gentleman’s obvious disagreements with the referendum result, the relevant bodies have obviously looked at the evidence and come to their conclusions. It will be a dark day when Ministers at the Dispatch Box instruct the police and the Electoral Commission how to behave.

As I say, the UC1 form implements a requirement under European Union law. As for the right hon. Gentleman’s figures regarding the vote itself, they are not figures that I recognise because they normally imply that my party is somehow supporting remain.

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): Seven weeks ago, Mr Speaker kindly granted me an urgent question on this exact topic, but the warnings were not heeded. Scores of EU voters were in touch with my busy office and with the electoral registration officer on Haringey Council on the day, just as predicted by many Members in this House on 25 April. Will the Minister lay out exactly what investigations his team will undertake now to put this situation right once and for all?

Kevin Foster: The Electoral Commission will do a report and present its conclusions—as it does with all major electoral events in this country—and it will do so independently, not under the direction of a Minister. We will then consider its conclusions carefully. To resolve the issue completely, we will look to implement the 2016 referendum result, as we have pledged to do.

Ms Angela Eagle (Wallasey) (Lab): I think the Minister has misunderstood his job. He seems to think it is about disenfranchising people who are going to vote the wrong way. After the 2014 European elections, the Electoral Commission warned that the current practice of requiring citizens to complete an additional form needed to be more streamlined, moving to a near automatic system of inclusion as is the case in most other European countries, yet the Minister and his Department did precisely nothing about it. [Interruption.] Perhaps he could get the smirk off his face. We are actually talking about democratic involvement; even though the Minister does not seem to rate it, Labour Members think that it is an important principle.

Kevin Foster: This is a process that has been used before in elections that actually happened under a Labour Government as well—let us be clear about that. It is a process where we followed the law. We had to comply with the European Council directive in how we held these elections, and that means having a declaration that we send over. If we wanted to talk about disenfranchising people, we could talk about what happened when an arbitrary limit of 15 years was imposed on overseas elections.

Ian Murray (Edinburgh South) (Lab): Dozens and dozens of my EU national voters were disenfranchised at this election. Given that the election has now gone, would it not be prudent for the Government to re-enfranchise them by holding a public vote on how we leave the European Union, allowing people who live, work and pay their taxes here, and who have done so for decades, to be involved in the future running of this country?

Kevin Foster: Let us be clear: Britain’s membership of the European Union was first decided by the parliamentary franchise in the form of the elections to this House back in 1972. It was therefore the parliamentary franchise that was used, with the addition of Gibraltar and Members of the other place. That is the one that the House chose for the referendum in 2016, and hopefully this House will actually finally listen to what was said in 2016 and implement that referendum vote.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): On 23 May, a significant number of my constituents who are EU nationals were denied their basic human right to vote, despite me and others having repeatedly raised on the Floor of the House the risk that that would happen, including my making a direct appeal to the Prime Minister at PMQs on the day before the elections to use the power of her office to do something about it. Does the Minister appreciate how this scandal has exacerbated the fears of EU citizens that their rights are not taken seriously by this Government? Does he therefore understand why there must be an inquiry into the Government’s failure to act, and will he answer the question posed by so many other hon. Members and commit to that inquiry?

Kevin Foster: I recall that the hon. and learned Lady’s suggestion at Prime Minister’s questions was about having forms at the polling station. However, that would directly conflict with the requirements of the Council directive, which says: “sufficiently in advance of polling day.” We could not have complied with that in having forms at the polling station. In terms of a review of what happened, as I have now said several times, the Electoral
Commission, as it always does, will review the conduct of the poll and bring forward recommendations, and it is completely independent in doing so.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): Can I say to the junior Minister that I feel sorry for him? Here he is, like the last boy left on the burning deck of the ship. He has no colleagues behind him. There is an absence of Government—where is his boss? The fact is that this is an important issue for democratic responsibility and accountability, and for parliamentary democracy, and we want to know the answer. Yet here we have—I hope it can be seen all over the world—an empty Chamber where this country has no Government and no Back Benchers: it has nothing. When are we going to get a general election to get rid of this ghastly regime?

Kevin Foster: I think that one is probably slightly beyond the scope of this urgent question. I would always say that it is good to have quality of support, if not necessarily quantity, on the Benches with me. The key issue in elections is that we comply with the law, and the law is as it has been set down for previous European elections. A key part of that is making sure that we comply with European law, given that this is not purely a vote in the UK about UK delegation members—it is ultimately an election of the entire European Parliament.

Hywel Williams (Arfon) (PC): Listening to the Minister’s initial answer, I wondered, if this was all so good, why did it turn out so badly? The Government claim to have been preparing for “all Brexit eventualities”, yet despite the billions of pounds being set aside, we have still had this blundering democratic deficit. Is there not a real danger that this Government’s reputation for Brexit splits and betrayals will be excelled by an equally deserved reputation for incompetence?

Kevin Foster: The thing I look at is that the turnout rose for the European elections this time. There may be criticisms about how things are handled, but I always look at how many people turned out and engaged, and it was the highest turnout for 20 years.

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): The Minister does not seem to have accepted the fact that this vote happened as a result of something that was entirely predictable. The Department for Exiting the European Union has a Minister for no-deal Brexit. Why has it not been prepared for “all Brexit eventualities”, yet despite the billions of pounds being set aside, we have still had this blundering democratic deficit? Is there not a real danger that this Government’s reputation for Brexit splits and betrayals will be excelled by an equally deserved reputation for incompetence?

Kevin Foster: I thank the hon. Lady for her question. The reality is that this Government are absolutely committed to implementing the democratic will of the British people expressed in the referendum in 2016, and it is a pity that other parties are not.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle (Brighton, Kemptown) (Lab/Co-op): I wrote to every single one of my EU national constituents at my own personal cost to inform them of this voter suppression. I wonder whether the Minister will repay me the cost of the postage, and whether he will also reflect on article 9(4) of the directive he cites, which says that Community voters “shall remain” on the register until they are removed. Getting them all to re-sign the form was therefore a breach of Community rules, and he should learn his law better.

Kevin Foster: I am afraid that this is exactly the same procedure that was adopted in 2014 and in 2009—

Lloyd Russell-Moyle: And the Commission said it was wrong.

Kevin Foster: I am interested to hear what the hon. Gentleman’s comments were about the then Labour Government.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle: Goodness me, man!

Mr Speaker: Mr Russell-Moyle, you are a person of passionate convictions. You are in some danger of rivalling your hon. Friend, the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull East (Karl Turner), who I am inclined to inform audiences across the country and round the world is the noisiest Member of the House. That is a questionable accolade.

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): Many EU nationals in my constituency were also denied their vote. It is simply unacceptable that registered voters who have turned out to vote were turned away without explanation. As decreed in article 39 of the EU charter of fundamental rights, the right to vote is universal and equal. Does the Minister agree that this fiasco is something that a modern democracy should not tolerate?

Kevin Foster: As I said, the Government took all legal steps necessary in conducting the European parliamentary elections. That included complying with European law, including the Council directive, which requires details of these declarations to be sent “sufficiently in advance” of polling day. We cannot just assume that people wish to vote in this country, rather than the country where they are a citizen.

Anneliese Dodds (Oxford East) (Lab/Co-op): The Minister is actually right about two things. He is right that this process has been used before, and he is right that the Electoral Commission makes independent recommendations. But ridiculously, he refuses to acknowledge that Conservative Ministers ignored those recommendations about this process right back in July 2014. Does he acknowledge that the Electoral Commission made recommendations about this process back in July 2014—yes or no?

Kevin Foster: As I have said in numerous answers, we complied with the legal steps necessary to conduct these polls, following the House’s refusal to back an exit from the European Union which many Members elected to this place had pledged to do. We will of course listen with interest to the Electoral Commission’s review of these elections, but it is our intention that the UK will no longer participate in European parliamentary elections, having implemented the result of the referendum.

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): If there had been 1 million Conservative voters—yes, I know—threatened with disenfranchisement by uncertainty about whether the elections would take place, the Government would
Kevin Foster: EU citizens can be reassured that there is a huge amount of work going on to ensure that their rights are protected after Brexit, including their democratic rights in this country. Let us be clear: UC1 forms and declarations of their nature are not unusual for UK citizens living in the EU. We have used them before, and we will hopefully not use them again, because we believe in respecting referendums, although I accept that for the Scottish National party, that is a rather unusual concept.

Vicky Foxcroft (Lewisham, Deptford) (Lab): Paloma Luna has lived in my constituency since 1992, and she has voted in every single local and European election until this year. Because of the impossible timetable set by the Government for our electoral services, Paloma never received the UC1 form. Electoral services normally have three months for such things, and this time they had three weeks. What does the Minister have to say to all of those who were denied their fundamental, basic human right to vote? And please do remember that these are human beings.

Kevin Foster: Starting with local elections and Assembly elections, there is absolutely no need to complete a UC1 form, because there is no requirement to make a declaration to another member state, so those electoral rights are protected and clear, and many used their vote in the local elections three weeks prior. To be clear, this is a process where we did what we could to make sure people were available. The Electoral Commission put out guidance and encouraged local returning officers well before the election—about a month before the actual deadline for registration. Plus, we have moved on in recent years in allowing registration online, something that was not available in the past.

Martin Whitfield (East Lothian) (Lab): It is disappointing that some areas seemed to accept UC1s on the day of the election, but not those in Scotland, which said they were instructed to do that. The Minister has said that he took “all legal steps”, so can he confirm the percentage of UC1 forms that were forwarded to countries overseas between 7 May and the election?

Kevin Foster: To be clear, UC1s should not be being accepted on polling day, given that the Council directive is very clear that the information needs to be exchanged sufficiently in advance of polling day. Once information was collated after 7 May, it was then communicated to member states, just as other member states communicated those details to us. That process has existed for many years.

Jo Stevens (Cardiff Central) (Lab): A number of my EU-national constituents were prevented from voting on 23 May, and they are exceptionally angry about it. The issues on polling day were a direct and deliberate result of the failure by the Government—the coalition Government and then the Conservative Government—to address the concerns raised by the Electoral Commission after the 2014 elections. At the very least, my constituents are owed an apology. Are they going to get one?

Kevin Foster: Again, I can make it clear that the Government took all legal steps necessary to conduct this poll, as we were legally obliged to do. As I say, we will look with interest at what the Electoral Commission’s review of this election states. However, we are clear that we have no intention of taking part in the EU parliamentary elections in 2024, because we intend to leave the European Union and honour the referendum result.

Ged Killen (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Lab/Co-op): Is the Minister seriously trying to say that nothing went wrong here, and that is why he will not apologise? I, too, have constituents who sent all the forms off in time and who went on the day with an extra form just in case, and they were denied the right to vote. They were disenfranchised by this Government. Surely they are owed an apology. Will the Minister take that opportunity now?

Kevin Foster: Again, what I would say is that we will ask the Electoral Commission to review that for anyone who did comply with the requirements, although clearly we would need to look at what happened in that particular instance with that particular ERO. Ultimately, at the end of the day the UC1 is not an optional process; we have to comply with the Council directive. That is not something we have an ability just to vary.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): First, I would like to thank David Miller and his team at Glasgow City Council for doing their very best in the circumstances this shambolic Government have thrown at them. Those circumstances resulted in one of my constituents, who had registered in time when they moved into their property in Dalmarnock, not having enough time to get the UC1 form back and therefore losing their democratic rights. Will the Minister issue an instruction to returning officers to ask them how many people lost their votes in similar circumstances, and to ask for their advice on what the Government should do in response?

Kevin Foster: I thank the hon. Lady for her question. Clearly, it is the Electoral Commission that will be conducting the review of how the election went, and I am almost certain it will be in contact with local returning officers to discuss any issues that were raised. Likewise, at that point it would certainly more than welcome and would probably be quite interested in hearing the experiences of how the process operated in reality.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): The Minister knows that the Government were tearing themselves apart on whether or not to participate in these EU elections until 7 May, but what steps did his Department take to talk to other EU countries about extending the deadline? In the age of electronic communication, surely fewer than 16 days is necessary.

Kevin Foster: The Government were never tearing themselves apart over whether to hold the elections. We were clear that we would fulfil our legal obligation to hold them if necessary as a member of the European Union, and we did. Regarding the exchange of information that already takes place electronically, there is a clear need to finalise registers at a certain point, and to ensure that information is collated and then exchanged with other member states. The timescales now are similar.
to those put in place in the past, and the UK is one of the first countries to vote, on the Thursday, along with Holland. Even though some countries vote later, we have to be ready for the start of the European elections, not halfway through.

Paul Blomfield (Sheffield Central) (Lab): The empty Government Benches will send a powerful message to EU nationals across the country. Many of them in my constituency contacted me to say that they had registered to vote online, after it became clear on 11 April that the elections would be taking place; they told me that the system did not alert them to the need to complete a UC1 form, nor was it available online. Does the Minister accept that the Cabinet Office’s failure to ensure that proper processes were in place denied them their vote?

Kevin Foster: To be clear, the Electoral Commission website had guidance on registering to vote; the UC1 form was available; and there were links to the Your Vote Matters website, where the form could be downloaded and returned. It was available online. There were some issues with those who mistakenly used unofficial registration sites, and perhaps the Electoral Commission will consider how we can make clearer the differences between unofficial websites purporting to be for electoral registration and Your Vote Matters, the official Electoral Commission site.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): My constituent, a Spanish national, had a similar experience: he believed he had returned his UC1 form digitally, but the local authority said it could find no trace of it, and advising him on 3 May on a website that he should have downloaded it, printed it out and posted it back is not reasonable when he had an expectation that his digital form was acceptable. Is it not time there was a proper Government-sponsored inquiry into every stage of the process, so that we can understand exactly what went wrong with both the system and the information available to voters?

Kevin Foster: I think it right that the Electoral Commission independently looks at the process for the European parliamentary elections and draws its conclusions independent of Government. That seems to me to be a process that builds more confidence in the recommendations that emerge.

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): The Minister says the legislation is in place, but the processes clearly are not, despite the recommendations from the 2014 investigation, which have not been implemented. Many of my constituents have contacted me to say they were refused the vote on election day, despite their having voted in London and council elections, and even the 2014 European parliamentary elections. Does the Minister not acknowledge that this debacle only adds to the anger and sense of exclusion felt by so many of the

3 million EU citizens in this country since the 2016 referendum? Is it not worried that it will exacerbate the rate at which EU citizens leave our country and so no longer contribute to our society?

Kevin Foster: One of the handy things of having my hon. Friend the Minister for Immigration on the Bench beside me is that I know that there are still more EU citizens coming to this country than leaving. We very much welcome that, given the skills and talents they bring to this country.

The process we follow is similar to the one used in other EU states for UK citizens living abroad. I understand that people have concerns. My big concern would be if turnout had gone down, but in fact turnout went up. One of the biggest threats to European parliamentary elections was the absolutely dismal turnout 20 years ago.

Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): It really does seem that sorry is the hardest word. My constituents have faced all the problems outlined by my hon. Friends, including the situation where the form has been properly filled in but they are still denied the vote—and, of course, denied their vote in their home country, so they are doubly disenfranchised. At the end of these exchanges, could the Minister show some grace on behalf of the Government and apologise not to Opposition Members, but to the people who have been disenfranchised?

Kevin Foster: As I touched on earlier, we would expect the Electoral Commission’s review to look at issues with local councils where the form was returned in compliance with the law and then not complied with. The Government would not have dealt with that directly. Election turnout rose compared with previous similar elections, and we hope that this election will not take place again following the UK’s exit from the European Union.

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): “This feels like one big scam”—that is what one citizen I represent told me about his experience of this process. I say to my fellow Devon MP that I think he has got this one wrong. When the Electoral Commission publishes its report, will he now commit to publishing it and bringing it back to this House with a statement, so that he can say sorry, from the Dispatch Box, to all the EU citizens who have been denied a vote, and set out how it will be corrected in future?

Kevin Foster: I always respect the passion of the hon. Gentleman, my friend from Devon, when it comes to raising issues and campaigning on behalf of his constituents. We will of course see what the Electoral Commission report brings back. It will be a public report, so it will be published. We will certainly then consider what next steps would need to be taken if we were ever to have European parliamentary elections again, although, as the hon. Gentleman will know, my view is that we should implement the referendum result so that we will not be an EU member the next time they take place.
Illegal Seaborne Migration

4.16 pm

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con) (Urgent Question): To ask the Home Secretary if he will prevent illegal seaborne migration across the short straits of the English channel.

The Minister for Immigration (Caroline Nokes): The English channel is one of the busiest shipping lanes in the world. Every crossing attempted by migrants, often in unsuitable and very small boats, is life-threatening for those on board. These attempts not only represent a hazard to other vessels but threaten the safety of the Border Force, coastguard and lifeboat crews who come to their rescue. The Government are committed to preventing migrant crossings in small boats. My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary declared a major incident in December last year, and our heightened response remains in place.

In January, the Home Secretary met his counterpart Monsieur Castaner and agreed a joint action plan to tackle seaborne arrivals. He will be speaking to him again later this week. The joint action plan builds on the extensive work we have undertaken in partnership with France over the past few years, including under the 2018 Sandhurst treaty. It demonstrates the strength and depth of our bilateral relationship and both countries’ enduring determination to secure our shared border and prevent illegal migration through France. Through measures such as increased surveillance and co-ordination of our joint response via the joint information centre, the plan enhances our robust border security.

The solution is not all about increased surveillance in the UK but also about preventing vessels from leaving France in the first place. We have recently delivered drones and other surveillance equipment to France, enabling its law enforcement officers to intercept and disrupt attempted crossings. We continue to look at a range of tactical options that work on both land and sea. Those attempting to cross should be aware that their efforts will be in vain. Since January, more than 30 people who arrived illegally in the UK in small boats have been returned to France and other member states under the Dublin regulation. We have many more in the pipeline for return.

Finally, we are tackling the organised crime gangs who are exploiting vulnerable and desperate individuals. Only yesterday, a French court sentenced two men to prison for helping migrants to make the treacherous journey across the channel. The summer months and settled weather will present us with further challenges, but we will continue to work co-operatively with France to secure our borders and seek to prevent further crossings from taking place.

Mr Hollobone: Mr Speaker, I thank you for granting this urgent question and the Minister for her response.

In December 2018, the Home Secretary declared a major incident and said that countering this illegal migration would be an operational priority for the Home Office. That was in response to 40 illegal migrants who were picked up on Christmas day crossing the short straits. The Home Secretary had to rush back from his Christmas holiday to try to deal with the crisis. Despite what the Minister says, the problem is getting not better, but worse. At the end of May, 74 people—a record number—were intercepted on one day in a record number of boats. Some 140 migrants were picked up in the month of May, the highest number since December. I have no doubt that the Government say that this is an important issue and that they want to tackle it. In a Westminster Hall debate that I held on 30 January, the Minister responded that “we have an absolute duty to protect the border and stop organised crime gangs exploiting vulnerable individuals who want to come here by sending them through the busiest shipping lane in the world. That is why we must stop this incredibly dangerous route becoming the new normal for those wanting to enter the UK illegally.”—[Official Report, 30 January 2019; Vol. 653, c. 424WH.]

The police have said that trying to cross the short straits is like trying to “cross the M25 at rush-hour on foot.” It is incredibly dangerous for the families and children involved. We must be able to defend our coastline from this illegal immigration.

We are spending some £50 million—we are giving that amount to the French Government—to try to stamp out this migration flow, but it is not working. In 2018, 543 illegal migrants attempted to cross to this country from France. There were 438 in the three months from October to December. Eighty per cent. of them are Iranian, and apart from Germany, we are the biggest recipient of asylum claims from Iran of any EU country. The way to solve the problem is not to throw money at the French, but simply to take these people back to France when they are intercepted at sea. That will stop them attempting the crossing in the first place. If they know that they cannot come here and that they will be taken back to French ports, it will put an end to the horrible trade of human trafficking, which is driving this illegal activity.

The Government have, I am afraid, introduced largely cosmetic measures to show that we are trying to tackle this problem. We have had the Royal Navy offshore patrol vessel, HMS Mersey, bobbing around in the channel while Border Force cutters were being returned from the Mediterranean. Not one asylum seeker was intercepted by the Royal Navy, despite the best efforts of all the sailors. I have huge praise for all the men and women in the Border Force, the Royal National Lifeboat Institution, the coastguard and the Royal Navy, who have been doing their best, but the way to solve the problem is for the Government to take a strategic decision that once these people are intercepted at sea they are returned to France. If they make it to our coast, they should be returned under the Dublin regulations. Returning 30 of these poor individuals is simply not enough when over 500 are coming here during any one-year period. Indeed, 35,000 people claim asylum each year and we have returned only 1,186 since 2015. Will the Minister assure the House that we will have not just warm words, but effective action and a change of policy to send these people back to France?

Caroline Nokes: I am sorry, Mr Speaker, but this might be a somewhat lengthy response. I reassure my hon. Friend that gold command still meets on a weekly basis and continues to do so, because we have always been conscious that the summer months may well bring better weather that would further incentivise people to make what is an incredibly risky journey.
My hon. Friend talked about Dublin returns, but I am very conscious that in many cases, these people have fallen prey to organised crime gangs. Their journey through Europe is incredibly rapid. There is very little evidence of them being in any camps around the Calais area before they seek to make a crossing, and there is simply no hit on the Eurodac system to demonstrate that they have been in another EU country before they arrive here. Under those circumstances, one cannot use the Dublin regulation to return them because they have simply not been recorded in another EU member state. More returns are in the pipeline—there have been 30 so far. We continue to work with not just EU member states but countries of origin to make sure that we can make progress in returning people to their home country.

My hon. Friend said that surveillance equipment and resources provided to the French were not doing the job and were cosmetic, but far from it. We have provided significant surveillance equipment, including drones, night vision goggles and high-powered wharf lights, to enable the French to redouble their efforts on the beaches. It is important to reflect that the coastline is very long—120 km—and has many sandy beaches and small tracks that enable vehicular access.

The French disrupt about 40% of attempted crossings before they leave the beaches, which is absolutely where the disruption should be taking place; it should not be taking place in the middle of the channel, which is incredibly hazardous for the lifeboat crews, the Border Force cutters, the coastguard and the migrants themselves, who put themselves at incredible risk. We will continue to use our best endeavours to deny the crossings the opportunity to launch, because once they are mid-channel, it must be about preserving life. I do not want to see in the English channel repeats of the scenes in the Aegean, where people have lost their lives in significant numbers, so I make no apologies for making sure that the efforts in the channel are about rescue.

Ms Diane Abbott (Hackney North and Stoke Newington) (Lab): I query the framing of the urgent question, which talks about “illegal seaborne migration”. We cannot know whether these people are genuine refugees until we have had the opportunity to examine their cases. I am glad the Minister mentioned the risk to life in the busiest sea lane in the world. We all agree that it is tragic that these men and women are the victims of organised crime and people traffickers. I have visited Calais, and although many of these people do not come directly from there, the people one meets in and around Calais are hugely exploited and vulnerable, and Members should show a bit more concern for the risk to life and the vulnerability of these persons.

We need to be careful not to be unduly alarmist. We are not being invaded. There is no comparison to D-day, or whatever flights of imagination some of our media resort to. When the issue of asylum seekers crossing the channel last arose, back in February, the Home Secretary was roundly criticised for his comments. He questioned whether the people apprehended were genuine refugees, and he added:

“If you somehow do make it to the UK, we will do everything we can to make sure you are ultimately not successful because we need to break the link”.

That is not correct. It does not conform to international law. As I said, no one can possibly know whether every one of these cases is not a genuine claim for asylum. That decision must await the application itself and its examination. What the Home Secretary should have said is that we will do everything to uphold the law, and that means not making assumptions about the people crossing the channel but examining all applications impartially, granting asylum where it is justified and denying it where it is not. Each application must be judged on its individual merit, irrespective of how that person reached this country. That is the law. As I said, I query the framing of the urgent question. The Minister seemed to accept it. Does she accept that she cannot be sure—that no one in the Chamber can be sure—that the people arriving here are doing so illegally until their cases have been examined?

On the wider issue of migration and asylum seekers, commentators and some Members appear to believe that more naval patrols can resolve the issue. That has been tried and has failed spectacularly and tragically. The mere existence of a naval patrol will not deter desperate people. According to the Missing Migrants Project, there have been 543 deaths in the Mediterranean this year alone. A maritime policing approach—let alone just turning back people who might be in British waters—does not work. It is a stain on our humanity and is shameful.

I am sure that the majority of Members understand that these deaths are terrible and unacceptable and that we should do everything we can to reduce their number. The Opposition support the right policies—the legal policies: policies that work, preserve our humanity and uphold human dignity, wherever people are from and however they came to this country. We have long supported the policy that works: the establishment of legal routes for asylum seekers and refugees. This is what all responsible stakeholders propose and meets our obligations under international law. We cannot assume that because of the way in which someone enters the country, that person is necessarily an illegal migrant. We should not dismiss the risk to the lives of people who, as I have said, are crossing one of the busiest sea channels in the world. We want to arrive at a sustainable solution that does not involve suspicion of people because of the way in which they cross the channel, and that means each case is dealt with on its merits.

This is a difficult situation, not least for the people who are so frightened, so desperate and so exploited that they seek to make the crossing in unsavoury craft. However, we do not want to hear more reactionary grandstanding.

Caroline Nokes: I hope the right hon. Lady is content that she has not heard reactionary grandstanding from me this afternoon, and that I have sought to focus on the efforts that are being made to save the lives of—she used this term herself—exceptionally vulnerable people, who are vulnerable before they take to the water in small and unsuitable craft, and much more vulnerable once they are in the midst of a very busy shipping lane. I hope I can reassure her that members of this cohort are treated no differently from others on receipt of their asylum claims. We study them in relation to our convention obligations under the human rights charter and, of course, EU regulations and directives.
When we have ascertained that Eurodac hits show that people have previously claimed asylum in another country, we will, of course, seek to return them under the Dublin regulation. As I have said, there have been 30 such cases so far, and there are many more in the pipeline. But the important point, which the right hon. Lady also emphasised, is that these are people in a vulnerable position, and it is absolutely our duty under maritime law to ensure that they are safe at sea.

Charlie Elphicke (Dover) (Con): My constituents on the Dover frontline are seeing what was a crisis at Christmas turn into a surge through the summer. We cannot have a summer of chaos on the English channel. May I call on the Minister, and all Home Office Ministers, not simply to pick up the phone to the French and Mr Castaner, but to have a meeting with their counterparts in France and enter into a new compact that will establish the measures we need to ensure the security of the border on both sides of the English channel, and to bring this crisis to an end?

Caroline Nokes: My hon. Friend will be aware that the Home Secretary met Mr Castaner earlier this year. Indeed, I accompanied him back to Calais to visit the joint co-ordination centre. There are ongoing weekly meetings between Border Force officials and the police aux frontières, and with the regional préfet and sous-préfet, to discuss precisely this issue. However, as my hon. Friend has pointed out, it is about the border on both sides of the channel. It is much more effective to prevent a small craft from leaving the beach and thereby not risking life and limb than to seek to turn anything around in mid-channel. It is crucial for us to understand the implications of rescue operations in the middle of the channel. There are often children in those boats, and tactics are often deployed to ensure that the migrants are vulnerable. How despicable is it that they are being exploited by organised crime gangs who deliberately put children in those boats? It is far safer and much more desirable for us to prevent the launch of those boats than to take action at sea.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): It has been good to hear the Minister acknowledge the vulnerability of many of the people who are making this dangerous crossing, and separate the victims of the traffickers from the traffickers themselves. Many of the people who make the dangerous journey across the channel have survived war, conflict and persecution in countries such as Syria, Iran, Afghanistan and Eritrea, so we are dealing with vulnerable adults as well as vulnerable children.

However, it is also important to acknowledge that the number of people trying to reach the United Kingdom by boat is lower than the numbers in 2015 and 2016. To describe this as a crisis, or a major incident, risks creating the perception that the UK is overflowing with people claiming asylum, when the figures show that in the year ending September 2018, Germany, Italy and France all received twice as many asylum applications as the UK.

I echo the shadow Home Secretary’s comments: asylum and claiming asylum is a right, and asylum claims should not be prejudged. The 1951 refugee convention states that neither how people arrive in the country in which they claim asylum nor how many safe countries they have passed through should affect the outcome of their claim, so I look to the Minister for assurance that everyone who arrives, even by these reprehensible methods, is appropriately and that due process has been followed.

The best way to address the risk of people making these dangerous journeys is to expand safe and legal routes such as family reunion and to bolster existing resettlement programmes. The resettlement programme introduced after the Syrian refugee crisis saved thousands of lives. I commend the UK Government for that, but we need to see it continue. Will the Minister commit to expanding the programme after 2020?

Caroline Nokes: The hon. and learned Lady is right to point out that many of these people are the victims of organised crime gangs, but I would like to expand on one point, because they are not simply fleeing war. In many cases they are, as we know from the figures, Iranian nationals, who may have paid many thousands of pounds to make that journey and have done so putting themselves, and in some cases their families, at risk of falling prey to the very reprehensible tactics, as the hon. and learned Lady described them, of the organised crime gangs who make them vulnerable by choosing this route.

The hon. and learned Lady is right to point out that the figures are lower than at the height of the migrant crisis in 2015, but that does not mean I am complacent in any way, because we do not wish to see the numbers go back to those levels. It is imperative that we seek to ensure our action with the French prevents people from making these perilous journeys.

I reassure the hon. and learned Lady that due process is followed in every case, but, as she will have heard me say, in those cases where there is a previous asylum claim in another EU member state we will seek to return people to those countries.

On the vulnerable persons resettlement scheme, the hon. and learned Lady will know that we are on course to meet the 20,000 commitment by the end of 2020 and indeed have so far resettled over 15,000 individuals from the MENA—middle east and north Africa—region.

The hon. and learned Lady speaks about an issue that is a particular passion of mine, and having put in place the processes and structures that have enabled us to take part in the VRPS, working with local authorities and NGOs and various other agencies, I believe it is important that we maintain that commitment. It is wrong in my view to be a world leader in resettlement and to seek to pull back from that, but I am afraid the hon. and learned Lady will have to wait for an announcement, which I am sure will not be too distant.

Damian Green (Ashford) (Con): The safety and security of the Kent coast is of tremendous concern to my constituents as well as those of my hon. Friend the Member for Dover (Charlie Elphicke). The Minister is absolutely right: co-operation with the French authorities, which has been carrying on for years, is the key to minimising the terrible trade. Will she reassure me and my constituents that the British Government’s efforts to fight the organised criminals that facilitate this terrible trade are being ever-increased, because that is the most effective thing the British Government can do to minimise this dangerous traffic?
Caroline Nokes: I thank my right hon. Friend for that question, and I have indeed noticed that there is much interest from Kent MPs this afternoon. He is absolutely right to talk about the levels of investigation and shared intelligence with the French. To date, 14 French investigations have been instigated directly in response to National Crime Agency intelligence, and we have sought to enhance existing French intelligence.

Between them, Immigration Enforcement and the NCA have made 24 arrests in relation to the small boats threat, and there are ongoing inquiries into five persons of interest from the incidents on Saturday. As I mentioned earlier, there was one conviction and imprisonment yesterday in France and we absolutely must make sure we keep up our intelligence-sharing and criminal investigations to see off these crime gangs at the outset.

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): I welcome what I think the Minister was saying about wanting to continue the resettlement programmes. The Home Office is right to want to prevent dangerous journeys across the channel, where lives can be at risk. The Home Office made a big announcement about the deployment of HMS Mersey and HMS Enterprise to the channel, but can the Minister confirm that neither of those vessels was involved in leading any interceptions while they were deployed? Is it correct that the deployment cost the Home Office nearly £1 million? Does she agree that it is important that these measures should be evidence-based and not simply about being able to make big announcements?

Caroline Nokes: The right hon. Lady is absolutely right to say that we should not seek just to make big announcements, which is why I am not making a big announcement on resettlement today, although I could have been tempted to do so by the previous question. I have always made my position clear, and I have worked closely with non-governmental organisations and Ministers across Government on resettlement. I am conscious that we should be proud of the vulnerable persons resettlement scheme, on which we have done, and continue to do, some fantastic work. It is important that we keep our commitment to resettling the most vulnerable individuals from very difficult parts of the world.

On the deployment in the channel, it is a matter of record that we had to bring cutters back from the Aegean. It was important to have a presence in the channel during the intervening period offering coverage in case there was an horrendous incident in which lives were in peril. It was better to have capacity in the shape of a Royal Navy ship than to have nothing. The Home Secretary made it clear that we should make the preservation of life and limb our priority and have the resources in place to rescue people if needed. We should be incredibly thankful that there was no such requirement while the Royal Navy was there in the channel.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: I call Tracey Crouch, who is sporting her Spurs lanyard.

Tracey Crouch (Chatham and Aylesford) (Con): It is very good of you to notice that, Mr Speaker. I look forward to watching Tottenham on Wednesday nights next season, whereas you, Sir, will have to watch Arsenal on Thursday nights because, as the chant goes, you’re not very good.

I know that my right hon. Friend the Minister is aware of the involvement of the Kent lifeboats, especially the Dover lifeboat, in responding to illegal migration crossings. The crews are mainly made up of volunteers and have been called out on many occasions. Our lifeboats are funded almost exclusively by donations, so these crossings will have impacted on vital funding within the charity. Will she consider requesting extra funding from the Treasury to compensate the Royal National Lifeboat Institution for this particular aspect of its important work of saving lives at sea?

Caroline Nokes: As my hon. Friend knows, I had a really informative visit to the Dover lifeboat over the Christmas period, and it was absolutely at the forefront of understanding the channel, the risks and the crossing patterns that were emerging at the time. I was very impressed by the commitment shown by the brave men and women who crew the Dover lifeboat. She makes a valid point, and I would be absolutely delighted to put that request to the Chancellor, although of course I cannot make any commitments. It is important that we not only thank our lifeboat crews, and I would be happy to make that request to the Chancellor.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): Can the Minister categorically confirm that no one who could make a claim for asylum is being sent back to France under the so-called gentleman’s agreement that allows for migrants to be returned within a 24-hour period?

Caroline Nokes: I reassure the hon. Lady that this cohort is being treated no differently from any other.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: I cannot be expected to call two Tottenham fans in a row, so I call Huw Merriman.

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): It is always better to go for the Arsenal fan on that basis, Mr Speaker. It is very much with the vulnerable people in mind that I ask this question of the Minister. Will she ensure that she continues to apply the full force of the law? If we send out the wrong signal to people that they can make this perilous journey, I am afraid that more and more of them will lose their lives and be taken advantage of by despicable people. I say that because I represent an East Sussex English channel constituency, and I am afraid that we will be left to deal with the aftermath.

Caroline Nokes: I thank my hon. Friend for that question. As I mentioned earlier, Immigration Enforcement and the National Crime Agency have made a total of 24 arrests in relation to the small boats threat. It is imperative that we continue to keep up the pressure on organised crime gangs, but he is right to point out that the individuals who make the perilous crossings are, in many cases, both vulnerable and the victims of those gangs. It is important to treat them properly and to ensure that they are safe, but this has to be about disrupting organised crime, because that is where the real threat lies.

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): I am grateful to the Minister for her emphasis on safety and preventing harm and loss of life and to hear that an announcement
is imminent about the expansion, or something, of resettlement. However, returning to the question from my hon. Friend the Member for Stretford and Urmston (Kate Green), although the Minister said that people are being treated exactly the same, that is not quite the full answer that I and, I think, my hon. Friend were hoping for, so I will give her one more chance: is she absolutely sure that everyone who was entitled to apply for asylum was offered that chance?

Caroline Nokes: We will seek to return those who have registered on Eurodac because they have previously claimed asylum in a safe country. However, it is my understanding that everybody else who seeks to make an asylum claim will be treated absolutely the same as anyone else who applies for asylum in the UK. I am unaware of anybody who wanted to make a claim being prevented from doing so and returned, but it is right that if someone has previously made an asylum claim in a safe country we will seek to return them.

Sir Mike Penning (Hemel Hempstead) (Con): As the Minister responsible for deploying the Royal Navy off the Libyan coast during Operation Sophia, I am surprised that the crews of HMS Enterprise and HMS Mersey were not able to pick up these people. They may not have been drowning, but the crews have great expertise in dealing with such situations from previous operations. Were they instructed not to intercept unless there was a crisis? What operational orders were given to the Royal Navy?

Caroline Nokes: While Royal Navy vessels were in the channel, it is important to state that Border Force’s coastal patrol vessels and our cutters were also deployed. Although I cannot comment on the operational instructions given to Royal Navy vessels, we should be grateful that there was no loss of life or limb and that they were not needed to rescue people. Several coastal patrol vessels were in the vicinity while the Royal Navy vessels were there, and several are there now.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle (Brighton, Kemptown) (Lab/Co-op): Does the Minister agree that the development of a hostile environment in Britain pushes people towards criminals, meaning that they cannot get access to services here? The same is true across the channel in France. If we do not provide people with legal means of coming here through managed migration, that pushes them towards criminals. We need to open up better routes for people, so that they are not forced into the hands of criminals.

Caroline Nokes: Perhaps the hon. Gentleman missed me talking about the vulnerable persons resettlement scheme, which has so far resettled in excess of 15,000 people from the middle east and north Africa region. However, he is right to point out that managed routes such as that are far better than making perilous journeys across the channel.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): Why has the number of criminal deportations collapsed?

Caroline Nokes: My right hon. Friend will know that we always seek to deport foreign national offenders when possible. Our emphasis continues to be on returns and on ensuring that those who have served criminal sentences in the UK are deported when possible. That is not always the case, so this is about having returns agreements with other countries and ensuring that travel documents are available. However, it is our ambition, under the UK Borders Act 2007, to ensure that foreign national offenders are deported to their country of origin upon the completion of their sentence.

Stuart C. McDonald (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): I certainly give a provisional welcome to what the Minister said about the possibility of extending the vulnerable persons resettlement scheme, but we will wait to see exactly what is proposed. This is about safe, legal routes, so that people do not have to resort to smugglers if they are coming to the UK for legitimate reasons. Why are so many children having to wait many months in Calais to be transferred under the Dublin III scheme? Why is the Dubs scheme being wound down despite the fact that local authorities are saying that many places are still available for such vulnerable children?

Caroline Nokes: I reassure the hon. Gentleman that the Dubs scheme is not being wound down and that transfers continue. He will be aware that we have removed the date criteria, and we continue to work with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees on the best interest test to make sure that we can fulfil our commitment under the Dubs scheme.

The hon. Gentleman might also be aware that, at the end of May—I apologise for not having the precise date—we increased unaccompanied asylum-seeking children funding to £114 per child per night. We have worked tirelessly with the Local Government Association to encourage those who are not taking part in the national transfer scheme to do so, so that we can continue to make progress and fulfil our Dubs commitment.

Sir Edward Davey (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD): It is good to hear the Minister accept that the best way to prevent refugees from taking these dangerous crossings is to provide safe, legal routes to sanctuary for those fleeing persecution. Going back to the Dubs amendment, the Government promised two years ago to provide a scheme for 480 unaccompanied refugee children. When will that promise be delivered?

Caroline Nokes: The right hon. Gentleman will be aware that, at the beginning of last year, we changed the qualifying date for Dubs children in an endeavour to make sure that we could meet the 480 commitment. We have now removed the qualifying date altogether so that any child who qualifies and meets the UNHCR best interest test can be transferred under the Dubs agreement.

The right hon. Gentleman will have just heard me say that we have increased funding to local authorities, and I continue to encourage individual Members to contact their local authorities to encourage them to work under the NTS to take additional unaccompanied asylum-seeking children.

We have 4,500 unaccompanied asylum-seeking children in this country, and it is important that we continue to work with our colleagues both in local government and in the wider community to make sure that we meet that commitment. I urge the right hon. Gentleman to talk to his local council to see whether it can add to the UAS children it already takes.
National Minimum Wage Naming Scheme

4.51 pm

Stephanie Peacock (Barnsley East) (Lab) (Urgent Question): To ask the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy to make a statement on the suspension of the national minimum wage naming scheme.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Kelly Tolhurst): Enforcement of the national minimum wage and the national living wage is a priority for the Government, and we take tough action against the minority of employers who underpay. Last year, employers were ordered to repay over 220,000 UK workers a record £24.4 million of arrears. We have more than doubled the budget for minimum wage compliance and enforcement since 2015, and it is now at a record high of £27.4 million.

As part of our enforcement approach, we name employers who have breached the legislation, which raises awareness of national minimum wage enforcement and deters others who may be tempted to break the law. To date, the Government have named almost 2,000 employers who have underpaid the national minimum wage. The Government are reviewing the naming scheme to ensure that it continues effectively to support minimum wage compliance. This is in response to a recommendation made by the director of labour market enforcement, Professor Sir David Metcalf, last year.

In December 2018 we accepted both of the director’s recommendations relating to the naming scheme, specifically to review the scheme’s effectiveness and to consider how to provide further information under the scheme in future. The Government have sought to learn from other naming schemes and other regulatory approaches. We have also discussed the evidence with the director of labour market enforcement and have conducted further analysis to understand the impact that any changes to the scheme would have on the number of employers named.

Naming and shaming remains an important part of our enforcement toolkit, and the review will be concluded in the coming weeks. Any changes to the scheme will be communicated through the national minimum wage enforcement policy documents.

Stephanie Peacock: Thank you, Mr Speaker, for granting this urgent question, which finally forces a Minister to admit to the House that the Government have quietly dropped one of the few policies they had to protect vulnerable workers. The naming scheme had exposed nearly 2,000 employers who illegally underpaid nearly 100,000 workers by millions of pounds, including household names from TGI Fridays to Marriott hotels, but the last such list was almost a year ago.

As we now know, the Government have privately decided to suspend the scheme, despite the Department’s official guidelines maintaining that the scheme still operates. The Minister claims this was based on a recommendation of the director of labour market enforcement, made over a year ago, yet the director made no such recommendation to suspend the scheme; he simply called for an evaluation and specific improvements. The Government accepted those recommendations, so why have they not simply implemented them and continued with the scheme in the meantime? Can the Minister confirm that as this review has “no set completion date”, this policy has been effectively halted? Can she tell us what progress the review has made in the last year? What evidence has it taken, what research has been commissioned, what work has her Department done, and what proposals will come to the House and when? Or is the so-called review in reality just an excuse to let bad employers off the hook?

This is the latest in a long list of policies that would help working people, from fair tips to equality for agency workers, that have been delayed or dropped by the Government. Time and again, they crack down on the vulnerable and back down before the powerful. When will this capitulation to rogue employers over working people finally end?

Kelly Tolhurst: I have to say that the hon. Lady is incorrect: the scheme has not been dropped. Given the impact that being named can have on a business, it is right that we properly consider the effectiveness of the naming scheme. We want to make sure that our enforcement approach balances the need to crack down on the most terrible employers, who purposely and persistently break the law, with the need to be fair to and educate employers who try to do the right thing.

We are in no way going soft on employers. Last year, we issued record financial penalties to more than 1,000 non-compliant employers to the value of £17 million. That was part of our commitment to support workers’ rights. Our good work plan sets out a vision for the future of the UK labour market and includes an ambitious programme of work to implement 51 of the 53 recommendations Matthew Taylor made in his review of modern working practice.

I must point out, however, that it was this Government who gave the lowest paid workers the biggest increase in the national living wage in 20 years.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): I was reading the report from the Resolution Foundation, an independent organisation, and it says that the proportion of low-paid workers in Britain has dropped to its lowest level since the 1980s, thanks to the national living wage. Why on earth would we not name and shame employers if they were not complying with such an important part of the Government’s policy?

Kelly Tolhurst: I thank my hon. Friend for outlining that piece of work. It is right that naming and shaming rogue employers is a key part of our enforcement. We have doubled the budget since 2015 for enforcement of the national minimum wage, and one of the key things that I am particularly interested in is making sure that we go after those individual employers or big organisations that are deliberately trying not to pay workers the minimum wage.

Rebecca Long Bailey (Salford and Eccles) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for Barnsley East (Stephanie Peacock) for securing this important urgent question. One of the proudest achievements of the last Labour Government was the introduction of the national minimum wage, safeguarding workers from exploitative pay practices. Sadly, from the Trade Union Act 2016 to their failure to address exploitation through zero-hours
contracts or bogus self-employment, this Conservative Government cannot be proud of their record on workers’ rights. The admission today that the naming and shaming scheme has been effectively shelved only adds to that woeful record.

The national minimum wage is effective only if it is adequately enforced. The Government have stated that the naming and shaming element of minimum wage enforcement is vital, alongside other measures such as fines. Has the Minister made any assessment of the impact of the scheme’s suspension on minimum wage avoidance in the last year? Has the Department continued to identify those employers underpaying during that period, and what action has been taken?

The Minister will also be aware that the director of labour market enforcement also criticised the Government not so long ago in respect of their utilisation of the enforcement mechanisms available to them. The director also asked about additional resource, so it would be helpful if the Minister could identify what funding has been made available to enhance enforcement capacity at Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs.

Not only is enforcement of the minimum wage important, but the level at which it is set is crucial. I know the Chancellor of the Exchequer thinks that poverty is a figment of our imagination, but the fact is that in 2017 more than 1.5 million people had less than £10 a day to live on, according to the Joseph Rowntree Foundation. Labour is committed to ending the scourge of low pay. We will introduce a real living wage of £10 an hour and end the unfairness of lower rates for those under 18. Will the Minister take this opportunity to improve her Government’s record on poverty and workers’ rights and commit to doing the same?

Kelly Tolhurst: The hon. Lady says that the Government have nothing to be proud of, but I am absolutely proud to serve in a Government who have put so much focus on enforcing the national minimum wage. As I have already mentioned, this year we increased the national minimum wage by the biggest amount in 20 years, up 4.9%.

It is simply not true to say that we have shelved the naming and shaming scheme. It is absolutely right for me, as the Minister responsible, to evaluate the scheme and make sure that any naming and shaming scheme is meaningful, adds value, acts as a tool to aid employers to make sure that they are able to comply with the national minimum wage legislation, and enables us effectively to communicate exactly what the breaches are and why, and the detriment to the individual worker. We remain absolutely determined to stamp out low pay.

We currently have larger numbers of people in work than ever before, and it is absolutely right that those individuals should get the hourly rates to which they are entitled. As I said in my opening remarks, we doubled the enforcement budget to £27.4 million in 2019-20. That was up from £13.2 million in 2015-16. We are committed to continuing that enforcement. I will not make excuses for reviewing the naming and shaming scheme, because we want to add value and make it more effective, and we want to make sure that we aid employers, help workers to understand their rights and offer routes to recourse.

Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): I entirely agree with the Minister; I, too, am proud of the record that has meant £2,750 more has been put into the pockets of my Redditch constituents since the introduction of the living wage. Will the Minister update us on the progress towards having a single organisation that looks after workers’ rights, which will be valuable in the seeking of redress?

Kelly Tolhurst: I thank my hon. Friend for raising that point. She is absolutely correct that in our good work plan we announced our intention to consult on a single labour market enforcement body. Our good work plan was a major step forward for the Government. I should point out to Opposition Members that the good work plan is the biggest reformation of workers’ rights for 20 years. It is this Government who are doing it and I am proud to be part of it.

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): The Government’s wage policy simply is not delivering for those who need it. Under the Tories, FTSE 100 chief executive pay has gone up by two thirds; when will the Minister finally deliver for those who are not rich and match the Scottish living wage? Incidentally, the Scottish living wage is now paid by 1,300 employers in Scotland—more than a quarter of all the living wage employers in the UK. Outside London, that means a wage of £9.55 an hour paid to all workers, including those aged under 25 whom the Tories have left behind. If the Minister cannot commit to that, she should devolve powers so that the SNP Scottish Government can. Given that nearly 370,000 workers on national minimum wage contracts are being underpaid, will she commit to implementing in full the recommendations in the Low Pay Commission’s report on non-compliance and enforcement, including on naming rounds for those who do not comply?

Kelly Tolhurst: First, let me point out to the hon. Gentleman that we are not dropping the naming and shaming scheme. He was right to mention corporate governance and the issues around executive pay, which this Government take seriously and we are taking steps to address. He will know that the Low Pay Commission recommends national minimum wage levels to the Government. He mentioned the under-25s, but let me point out to him that almost nine in every 10 18 to 24-year-olds are paid above their wage bracket.

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): My constituency is one of the top 10 constituencies with the highest proportion of workers on the national living wage, so I welcome the fact that we have increased that wage by another £600 thanks to our excellent Chancellor and his Budget. I know that the Minister has come here to help the lowest paid make something of themselves, but may I say to her that it is essential that we make sure that employers do not get away with non-compliance, because it is unfair to other employers and to the employees who will not be protected. She is right to review the scheme, and she is taking great steps, but I urge her to keep the name and shame policy because there is no better way of shaming people into compliance.

Kelly Tolhurst: I thank my hon. Friend for his comments. Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs will investigate any complaint that it receives about underpayment of the national minimum wage. We also have ACAS, which provides a helpline for individuals who feel that they are not being paid the national minimum wage. Naming and shaming is part of our toolkit of enforcement, but,
as I have said, it is only one tool. I want to make sure that when we name and shame organisations, we understand what the detriment is and how much the detriment is. We need to make sure that, when we report these companies, we are reporting not just big names to grab a headline, but meaningful information that helps to advise and educate employers and, really importantly, educates workers so that they understand that, where there is a detriment, they can take action.

Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): With record numbers of people struggling with in-work poverty, this Government should be doing everything they can to reverse this shameful record. Instead, they are removing schemes that expose exploitative employers. Will the Minister think again and not only reinstate the national minimum wage naming scheme, but use the scheme to enforce the law? Will she also provide a date by which she intends to complete the review?

Kelly Tolhurst: The hon. Lady knows that I have a great deal of respect for her, but she has not listened to what I have said. We have not dropped the naming and shaming scheme. I want a scheme that is valuable and meaningful, that aids compliance and enables workers to get their entitlement, and that makes sure that employers follow the law. I want to focus on enforcement, absolutely making sure that we penalise and reprimand any employer that is underpaying workers who are entitled to the minimum wage. Since the start of the scheme, we have seen 12 prosecutions. Last year alone, there were seven labour market enforcement undertakings and orders where the national minimum wage had been breached. I am committed to this scheme; this Government are committed to this scheme. We have a record number of people in work, and, this year, this Government have overseen the largest increase in the national minimum wage.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): Can the Minister confirm that it remains Government policy to increase the national living wage to 60% of median earnings by 2020? If that does remain the case, will that not mean an extra pay rise for millions of workers?

Kelly Tolhurst: My hon. Friend is absolutely correct. We remain on target to reach our ambition of 60% of median earnings by 2020. That is something that this Government are looking forward to achieving. We are not stopping there. We are looking forward to seeing where we can continue to increase the wages for our lowest paid workers past 2020.

Jo Swinson (East Dunbartonshire) (LD): Naming and shaming employers who fail to pay even the basic minimum is one of the strongest ways that society can send a message that such behaviour is unacceptable. The Minister talks about the impact on employers of being named, but I am more concerned about the impact on workers who are underpaid—some of the most vulnerable people in our society. Whether it is deliberate or otherwise, they feel that impact. I recall the opposition that I had to face from the Minister’s Conservative colleagues when I was in her role and introduced this scheme. Will she give the House an assurance today that the review will include no watering down of the scheme to let employers off the hook, and will she name the date when the next round of naming will happen?

Kelly Tolhurst: Given the hon. Lady’s previous role, I know that she understands well the portfolio, and the naming and shaming system. I reiterate that we have not dropped the naming and shaming scheme. I have tried to be extremely clear that I want the naming and shaming scheme to be meaningful, add value and give us proper information so that we can understand where there is detriment to workers and why. We will still name individuals, but I want employers to comply with the law and workers to get what they are owed. That is not just about naming and shaming; it is also about ensuring that the information that we publish aids education and helps to stop any detriment to employees. Not all employers are wilfully paying under the national minimum wage, and we have a duty to educate businesses so that they are easily able to comply with the law.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): Why was it necessary for the Minister to suspend the scheme while she reviewed it to make it more meaningful and useful?

Kelly Tolhurst: I decided to do that because I wanted to ensure that I was naming and shaming with meaningful information. I will not make excuses for making sure that we are delivering and reviewing a policy, or for carrying out what the director of labour market enforcement asked us to do.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): So can the Minister confirm that those sleazebag employers who rip off the lowest paid in our country are actually going to be named and shamed for the last 12 months?

Kelly Tolhurst: Yes.

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): Naming and shaming is one tool, but does the Minister agree that one of the most powerful tools to increase incomes is to reduce the amount of tax paid by people on low pay? Like me, does she take pride in the fact that instead of people having to pay tax on earnings of above around £6,000, as was the case in 2010, the figure is now closer to £12,000—adding hundreds of pounds to people’s incomes?

Kelly Tolhurst: Absolutely, and this Government have made great ground in that regard. This is not about grabbing headlines. It is about ensuring that workers get the pay to which they are entitled, which is why we have doubled the enforcement budget and are collecting more arrears than ever before. There were more than 3,000 successful investigations by Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs in the last year alone. I want that budget to be spent effectively on catching more employers who are underpaying the minimum wage.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): It is all well and fine for the Minister to say that some under-25s are paid more than they are legally entitled to receive, but that gives no reassurance to those who are not. May I suggest that she adds to her naming and shaming scheme employers who employ young people on short-term, temporary contracts and then dismiss them when they cost more money?

Kelly Tolhurst: The hon. Lady raises an issue regarding the incorrect practice of employers. As I have said, HMRC will investigate every complaint and ACAS is available to receive those complaints. We have asked the
Low Pay Commission to undertake a review of the structure of the national minimum wage, and it will report back later in the year. We encourage employers always to pay above the minimum wage brackets if they are able to do so.

Jo Stevens (Cardiff Central) (Lab): The Minister has said on a number of occasions that the Government are taking tough enforcement action against employers who fail to pay the minimum wage, but between 2010 and 2018 in Wales there has not been a single successful prosecution resulting in a fine against employers for underpaying. This is not tough enforcement; it is impunity.

Kelly Tolhurst: The hon. Lady raises prosecutions as the only way of action or enforcement, but that is not true. I have said that since 1999 over £118 million has been paid back—to over 200,000 workers in 2019, so in just one year. It is true that there have been only 14 prosecutions. However, organisations are required to pay back the arrears, and pay a penalty, wherever a breach is found. I would like to highlight the fact that the Government have recently been consulting on salary sacrifice schemes. There have been examples in the media of workers being found to have a detriment through salary sacrifice schemes. This has been a key area in employers being caught under the national minimum wage legislation.

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): What assessment has the Minister made of the pay discrepancy among cleaners in Whitehall? The Department for International Development pays the London living wage but the Ministry of Justice, which should be seeking justice, pays the national minimum wage. What does she intend to do about it?

Kelly Tolhurst: I thank the hon. Lady for raising that point about the differences between Departments. I do not personally have the details of that and I have not looked into it, but I will happily do so, and I am more than happy to write to her with a fuller answer.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald (Glasgow South) (SNP): Last time I spoke to the Minister about the use of unpaid work trials and the minimum wage, there had not been a single tribunal case anywhere in the UK in this regard that had been successful. Since that time, there has, but it was in Jersey, where a Polish woman took on her employer and won back the £30 that the tribunal said she was entitled to for the trial. What impact will that have on UK employment law? In the 20-odd years of the National Minimum Wage Act 1998 we have only just this year had one successful tribunal. Does that not tell her that the law is deficient and needs amending, and that unpaid work trials should be outlawed in their entirety?

Kelly Tolhurst: The hon. Gentleman is a keen campaigner in the area of unpaid work trials. As I have said on many occasions, in most cases, unpaid work trials, if they are not a small trial that is conducive to the work environment, are illegal. On the back of his campaign and work that had been done before, we issued new guidance in December 2018. As I have said, where a worker feels that they have had a detriment, they are to report it to HMRC or ACAS. HMRC will investigate every complaint. We cannot just judge this issue on prosecutions. We need to judge it on where the detriment to the worker is, and then ensure that they get what is owed to them and that the employer is penalised.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister for the response that she has given. What discussion has taken place with the Chancellor with regard to help for small businesses who struggle to make the payroll, and have a presence on the high street, in order to provide tax relief or other help so that the local economy is helped and that small businesses can survive and pay a correct and fair wage?

Kelly Tolhurst: I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising the issue of small businesses. It is absolutely true that small businesses are the backbone of our economy—99.6% of all UK businesses are small businesses, and is absolutely right that we are able to help them. A key part of that is making sure that, as the small business Minister, I make representations to the Chancellor and across Government on what small businesses need. The work that is being done on the review of naming and shaming is to make sure that when small employers find themselves in breach of the national minimum wage legislation, we are able to give them the right guidance and advice to enable them to meet their obligations. Many small employers want to make sure that they pay the national minimum wage, and above the national minimum wage. It is our duty not only to penalise but to aid and enable small businesses to meet their obligations.
Post-18 Education and Funding

5.19 pm

The Secretary of State for Education (Damian Hinds): With permission, Mr Speaker, I would like to make a statement on the Government’s review of post-18 education and its funding—the first review since the Robbins report in 1963 to look at the totality of post-18 education. The Government will carefully consider the independent panel’s recommendations before finalising our approach at the spending review.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank the independent panel, led by Professor Sir Ivor Crewe, Jacqueline de Rojas CBE, Professor Edward Peck, Beverley Robinson OBE and Professor the Baroness Alison Wolf. The panel consulted a wide spectrum of experts, leaders and senior figures and received almost 400 responses to its call for evidence. I would like to thank all the stakeholders, including colleagues from across the House, who contributed to the review. We will continue to engage with stakeholders now that the independent panel phase is complete, as we work towards the completion of the review.

A lot of the attention will be on what this report says about higher education, but the majority of students in post-18 education are not at university. The report identifies the importance of both further and higher education in creating a system that unlocks everyone’s talents. As the Prime Minister said last week, further education and technical colleges are not just places of learning; they are vital engines of both social mobility and economic prosperity. Colleges play an essential part in delivering the modern industrial strategy and equipping young people with knowledge and skills for the jobs of today and tomorrow. We are conscious of the need for reskilling and upskilling at a time when we are all more likely to have multiple careers during our working lives.

We are already carrying out a major upgrade to technical and vocational education by introducing T-levels for young people and developing proposals to introduce employer-focused higher technical qualifications, at levels 4 and 5, which will provide high-quality technical qualifications to rival traditional academic options. We have also overhauled apprenticeships, to provide people with the skills and career paths they need for great jobs and great careers. But appropriate attention to our college sector—the backbone of technical education in this country—is required to ensure that technical education is an equally valid path for a young person as a degree route. The principles set out in this report will help lay the foundation for a sector that is stronger and more robust and will help cement its reputation as being among the best in the world.

Our higher education system transforms lives and is a great contributor to both our industrial success and the cultural life of the nation. It can open up a whole world of opportunities and broaden horizons. Whatever decisions we make about how best to take forward the recommendations in the report, it is vital that we support these institutions to continue to offer world-leading higher education to students in future.

The opportunity to study at university should be open to anyone with the talent and potential to benefit from the experience. Gaining a university degree has benefits for both individuals and society—or, in the jargon, both a private return and a social return. On average, doing a degree has strong earning returns, equating to more than £100,000 of extra lifetime earnings per graduate after tax, so we believe it is right that contributions to the cost of higher education need to be shared between the student and the taxpayer.

The scale of the Government subsidy today is in fact much larger than most people imagine—close to half of the total—and it is a progressive system, whereby those on the highest income contribute the most and those on incomes lower than £25,725 make no contribution. We believe it is essential that we provide the right support, to enable people from all backgrounds to access and, most importantly, succeed at university and other higher-level courses.

In 2018, we had record rates of 18-year-olds accepted to full-time university, up 0.4 percentage points to 33.7%. Students from the lowest-income households have access to the largest ever amount of cash support for their living costs. Already this year, we have increased living costs support for the 2019-20 academic year to a record amount.

However, although 18-year-olds from disadvantaged backgrounds are now 52% more likely to go to university than 10 years ago, there is more progress that we need to make. Disadvantaged students are still less likely than their more advantaged peers to attend the most selective universities, or to have the support they need to successfully complete their degree and to achieve a 2:1 or a first. The panel’s proposals on support for disadvantaged groups are an important contribution to the debate in this area.

I very much welcome the focus that the panel has placed on making sure that all higher education is of high quality and delivers well for both students and the taxpayer. There are very high-quality courses across the full range of subjects—from creative arts to medicine—but there are also courses where students are less well served. I have also spoken in recent months of bad practices not in the student interest, such as artificial grade inflation and so-called conditional unconditional offers.

The panel’s recommendations on student finance are detailed and interrelated, and cannot be considered each in isolation. We will need to look carefully at each recommendation in turn and in the round to reach a view on what will best support students and the institutions they study at, and what will ensure value for taxpayers. In considering these recommendations, we will also have regard to students currently in the system or about to enter it to ensure that any changes are fair to current and new cohorts of students.

I am sure the House will recognise that this comprehensive report, with detailed analysis and no fewer than 53 recommendations, gives the Government a lot to consider. We will continue to engage with stakeholders on the findings and recommendations in the panel report, and we will conclude the review at the spending review. However, I am clear that whatever route a student chooses and whatever their background, post-18 education should set them on a successful path for their future. With this vision, I strongly believe that both the higher education and further education sectors can and should continue to thrive together. I commend this statement to the House.
5.26 pm

Angela Rayner (Ashton-under-Lyne) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for early sight of his statement. “Augar is the epitaph for Theresa May’s government... slow, wrong-headed, indecisive and, above all, failing in its central objective, to help level up Britain.” This is not my verdict, but that of the Secretary of State’s Conservative predecessor; nor is it a reflection on the panel and all the recommendations it has put forward; it is a reflection on the Government on this Government.

Let us start with the obvious point: the Prime Minister has welcomed the report, but is powerless to implement it. Never have I seen a sight so pitiful as the Prime Minister lobbying her own Government. Are there any recommendations in the report that the Secretary of State has the power to adopt now or ever, or will every decision be deferred until the spending review or, perhaps more accurately, until the Conservative party has a new leader and presumably a new Chancellor?

As it stands, the Government have now wasted two years on a review to reach the blindingly obvious conclusion that, as the Prime Minister now admits, abolishing maintenance grants was a huge mistake. If only she could have done something about it. Can the Secretary of State at least assure the House that he wants them restored, and guarantee a decision in time for the next cohort of students? The review also proposes extending more maintenance support to lifelong learning across the board—a point that we would echo. Can he guarantee to consider that, and can he tell us whether it would apply to part-time students?

Decisions need to be made on funding. The outgoing Prime Minister promised that austerity is over, but there is every danger it will continue in tertiary education. Presumably, the Secretary of State accepts that a cash freeze in funding for universities means a real-terms cut. Is the tokenistic fee cut pushed by the Prime Minister not the worst of both worlds, as institutions will have their hands tied on funding while students will still be graduating with tens of thousands of pounds of debt? Is there any guarantee that universities will not simply be left to bear the burden of a cut to fees that mostly helps higher-earning, mostly male graduates at the expense of middle earners? Can he assure us that any such proposal will have an equality impact assessment?

Does the Secretary of State really want graduates to spend 40 years—almost all their working life—paying off their student debt? Is that what we want for our young people? What is the Secretary of State doing about interest rates that have increased, under his Government’s watch, to over 6% a year?

What are the implications for the devolved nations? How have they been considered? The Secretary of State spoke about the value of degrees. How will that value be assessed? How does he value, for example, courses that lead to vital public sector jobs that are, frankly, underpaid? Does our society as a whole not benefit from all of us having access to learning? Adult education is vital to our economy and society. Who will decide which courses qualify, and how far will the new funding go given the terrible toll of cuts to adult education since 2010?

The review, rightly, acknowledges as a central point the need to reinvest in further education and to integrate the whole system. Does the Secretary of State accept that the base rate funding cut to further education and funding 18-year-olds at a lower rate than 17-year-olds were both crucial mistakes? Underlying all those issues is the threat that instead of investing in the whole system, the Government will play universities and colleges off against each other—the very opposite of the collaboration and integration that is needed. Can the Secretary of State guarantee that he would not rob Peter to pay Paul by transferring resources, but would instead secure proper investment in both sectors? The report is a missed opportunity to re-examine the failures of the past decade’s free market experiment in education. Can the Secretary of State give us any reassurance that yet more college closures are not on the way?

There is much in the Augar review that is welcome, but its shortcomings go back to the limits that the Government placed upon it. The aspirations that both the panel and the Secretary of State expressed for our education system will always come up against the cold hard limits of the austerity that the Prime Minister once promised was over. Instead, it is the Prime Minister who is over.

Damian Hinds: I thank the hon. Lady for her questions. She asked a number of times whether I would guarantee to consider x, y or z, and I do absolutely guarantee to consider everything in the report. We will come forward with the conclusion of the review at the end of the year, at the spending review. That has always been the plan.

The hon. Lady asked about timing. If she cares to compare the timing of this review of post-18 education and its financing with that of the Diamond review in Wales, under the Labour Government there, she will find that it compares favourably. Regarding the devolved nations, I confirm that if there are any spending implications in the proposals we make at the conclusion of the review, and given that education is a devolved matter, funding for the devolved nations would apply in the normal way, including through the Barnett formula.

The hon. Lady asked me to commit to not playing off further education and higher education. I give her that absolute commitment. That principle is at the heart of the independent panel’s report: both routes of higher learning are essential for widening social mobility, for letting young people fulfil their full potential, and indeed for enabling our economy and our society to fulfil theirs.

We should not lose sight of the fact that we have a successful system in place, particularly for the financing of higher education. The hon. Lady and her Front-Bench colleagues constantly complain about it, but since the 2012 reforms, resource per student has increased dramatically, the living costs support available to disadvantaged students has risen to its highest ever level, more young people are going to university than ever before, and more young people from disadvantaged backgrounds are going to university than ever before.

Look at the record of the Opposition. Labour vowed to cancel student debt and to make university free, sometimes appearing to forget that there is no such thing as free. We want a well funded higher education and further education sector in this country, and there are only two types of people who can pay for that: the people who benefit from it and the people who do not. Having made that vow, Labour backtracked on its pledge to cancel student debt. No one will ever trust Labour again on student fees. People know that talk is cheap, but paying the price of broken promises is not.
Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con): I welcome much of the report, particularly its strong emphasis on further education and technical education. Our Education Committee report talked about value for money in higher education and universities, focusing on skills, employability and social justice. Does my right hon. Friend not agree that the real engine of those three things is using funds to boost and put more emphasis on degree apprenticeships? They help people from disadvantaged backgrounds to gain the skills they need, they help us to meet our skills needs and they ensure that people are employed in properly skilled jobs.

Damian Hinds: My right hon. Friend has been a consistent champion of apprenticeships—specifically, degree-level apprenticeships. I thank him and the Committee for their work on that, including the wider work he mentions on higher education. I confirm that I think degree-level apprenticeships play a very important role in our system.

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): Elements of the review should be welcomed. It is encouraging that the UK Government finally recognise the barrier that tuition fees can place in the way of a young person’s decision to go to university, but I suggest that the recommended reduction in fees is the bare minimum, rather than a meaningful reduction, for the young people who are considering this pathway. The Scottish Government will study the review’s recommendations carefully to examine the impact on the college and university sectors in Scotland.

UCAS figures currently show that the number of Scots winning a place at university, including those from disadvantaged backgrounds, is at a record high. That is a testament to the Scottish Government’s commitment to free education. I therefore welcome the recommendation that students from a low-income background in England will have maintenance grants reinstated, following the example set by the Scottish Government for low-income students.

The reduction in earnings threshold for repayment will hit those on a low income hardest. That, in addition to increasing the repayment time from 30 years to 40 years, will have far greater impact on low earners, who will have little hope of repaying early and will therefore accrue additional loan interest. What assessment has the Secretary of State made of the impact on lower earners of the earnings threshold reduction and longer loan repayments?

Universities have raised concerns that unless the income shortfall is made up by Government funding they will pay the financial penalty for these proposals. Will the Secretary of State confirm that the Government will make up the funding shortfall?

Finally, the review was carried out at the request of a Prime Minister now serving her last week in power. Will the Secretary of State assure the House that the proposals are to be considered now as firm Government policy, and that they will not be shelved once the Prime Minister departs and a new Tory leader takes over?

Damian Hinds: No, that is not correct. This is an independent panel report that feeds into the wider process of the Government’s review into post-18 education and its financing. As I said to the hon. Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Angela Rayner), who speaks for the Opposition, we will of course consider very fully all the recommendations.

The hon. Member for Glasgow North West (Carol Monaghan) asked about repayment thresholds. I might ask her why Scottish students are still waiting—and, I gather, will still be waiting until 2021—for the recommendation made by her independent review into repayment thresholds to be put in place. She talked about barriers to young people going into higher education. I am afraid that the reality is: in England, we have record numbers of people going into higher education. In Scotland, as a direct result of her policy, the number of university places remains capped, which limits the number of young people who can benefit from the opportunity of going to university. The impact of that is that the disadvantage gap, if we look at England, Scotland and Wales, is biggest of all in Scotland.

Joseph Johnson (Orpington) (Con): The Augar review does not mention the teaching excellence framework. What use does the Secretary of State think the TEF will have in assessing which courses offer value for money for students and the general taxpayer?

Damian Hinds: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for giving me an opportunity to pay tribute to all the work he did as universities Minister. The TEF is a very important reform and is part of the framework from HERA—the Higher Education and Research Act 2017—and the OFS that enables a much more holistic view of quality in higher education. It remains a central part of that architecture.

James Frith (Bury North) (Lab): A Government who abolished maintenance grants for our poorest students commission a review that concludes that we need maintenance grants for our poorest students. That same Government welcome the idea, led by a Prime Minister in her end of days as PM before it is all change for this Cabinet, so how will the Secretary of State make amendments for this mess in time and see grants brought back and the best of Augar brought in? This is a ghost ship Government—if it ain’t Brexit, don’t fix it. They do not have a hope for themselves. How can they possibly be the hope for higher education colleges and our students?

Damian Hinds: I gently mention to the hon. Gentleman that in his work on the Education Committee he has had an opportunity to look at the variety of what is available in our higher education system, much of which is of the very highest quality and competes with the best in the world. We also need to make sure that everybody is getting good access to that very high quality, that participation in university is widely spread through our society and that we concentrate not just on access to higher education, but on access and successful participation. We need to work more on all those things, but it remains the case that under this Government more young people than ever before have had the opportunity to benefit from a university degree.

Neil O’Brien (Harborough) (Con): Thanks to tuition fees, the unit of funding in real terms per student is now twice what it was when I went to university, despite universities having many more students. A student from a deprived background is now twice as likely to go to
university if they are in England rather than in Scotland. Does my right hon. Friend agree that it would be attractive to reduce the cost of going to university by cutting the number of low-value courses and not by making the general taxpayer pay, because that creates an unfairness, moves money from poor to rich, and it means that those who have already been get nothing and have been ripped off by a promise made on the front of the NME but burned just days after the general election?

**Damian Hinds**: I pay tribute to the work that my hon. Friend has done and the thought leadership he has shown in some of his writings on these subjects. He is absolutely right to identify the increase in resource available to universities, but total HE financing has risen by £6 billion or so over the period through a combination of more students and higher resourcing. One thing that the report analyses in fine detail is exactly how we make sure that we properly reflect both the value and cost to serve of these courses. What he says is very apt.

**Dr Roberta Blackman-Woods** (City of Durham) (Lab): It is good, I am sure, that we have agreement across the Chamber that more money should go into lifelong learning and further education, but we want to hear a guarantee from the Minister that those resources will not come from higher education. We also want a guarantee that if tuition fees are reduced, any shortfall of money going to universities will be made up by teaching grants from the Government not just for science, technology, engineering and maths subjects, but for arts and humanities subjects, because they are also very important for our economy. If these proposals will eventually see their way into legislation—it is not clear to any of us how that would happen—is the Minister going to consult the sector widely so that he does not destabilise it further? We need those guarantees so that universities have certainty if they are to compete globally.

**Damian Hinds**: The hon. Lady will shortly meet the universities Minister in her all-party group on universities and will have an opportunity to discuss some of these things further. She mentioned teaching grants. The Augar report recommends precisely that—that there should be top-ups, although not exactly the same for all subjects. Few people realise the extent of the teaching grant. It is £1.3 billion, with some 40%—two in five—of courses attracting some sort of teaching grant. What the report talks about is how we balance that correctly properly to reflect not only value but cost to serve, as I said to my hon. Friend the Member for Harborough (Neil O’Brien).

**Mark Pawsey** (Rugby) (Con): One way to reduce the cost burden of achieving a degree is to conclude the studies over two years rather than three. What does the Secretary of State have to say to those who argue for greater availability of two-year degrees?

**Mr Speaker**: Pioneered by the University of Buckingham, the only independent university in the country and housed in my constituency. [Interjection.]

**Damian Hinds**: My hon. Friend the Member for Rugby (Mark Pawsey) says, “Bring it on!”. Your intervention, Mr Speaker, also gives me an opportunity to say nice things about Buckingham, which is always welcome.

We have legislated on this exact point to make two-year degrees more prevalent and available. Having different models of learning—models that are more flexible and which fit in with people’s lives—and greater diversity of choice is a very good thing.

**Wes Streeting** (Ilford North) (Lab): Like others, I warmly welcome the thrust of the Augar report, which is that we desperately need more funding for further and lifelong learning, not least because, as the report states, adult education under this Government has been slashed by a whopping 45%. We have not heard the Secretary of State give a commitment yet on robbing Peter to pay Paul. Whether he likes it or not, the idea that the Treasury will make up the shortfall from a cut in tuition fees is as credible as the claim that austerity is over. In reality is he not proposing the worst of all worlds for universities and students—graduates paying more for longer for degrees that are worse funded?

**Damian Hinds**: The short answer is of course no. This is not my set of recommendations; it is a set of recommendations from an independent panel feeding into a Government review of post-18 education and its financing to make sure we have a vibrant and sustainable education system in higher education and further education. We are committed to that and will respond at the spending review.

**James Morris** (Halesowen and Rowley Regis) (Con): I welcome the Secretary of State’s statement. The Augar report identifies the strategic imperative of a transformation in adult education in this country. I represent a constituency in the west midlands where further education is of central importance to the future of young people. Does he agree that we need to focus our attention and resources on transforming the further education offer to adults and on high-quality vocational skills that serve the needs of economies such as the one I represent in the Black Country and the west midlands?

**Damian Hinds**: My hon. Friend is right that we need to evolve the way we do further, continuing and adult education so that it fits with the realities of the economy today and—perhaps more importantly—with the unpredictable change that we know is coming, and part of that is about the national retraining scheme, for the development of which we have already committed significant resources.

**Mr Barry Sheerman** (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): As I learned from the 10 years I chaired the Select Committee, we make most progress in higher education when we find a cross-party consensus, as anyone who looks at the Robbins report or subsequent reports, such as the Dearing report, will know. There is some good stuff in this report. Some of the people on it were special advisers to my Committee when I was Chair. We have to build a consensus. There are good things in the report and some things I really would not like. Our universities and colleges are the most important institutions for most towns and cities in the country, and we endanger their existence at our peril, so let us build a cross-party consensus. I love the part about a new fund for lifelong learning. Tony Blair introduced one in 1997. It failed, but everybody knew we should bring it back to secure the future of further and higher education. So I say well
done in part, but if the Secretary of State could keep a higher education Minister for more than a few months we would do a lot better.

**Mr Speaker:** The hon. Gentleman’s long-term aspiration should be to ensure universal public awareness of the length and distinction of his tenure as Chair of the Select Committee.

**Damian Hinds:** The hon. Gentleman was right about more than one thing—let us say several. He spoke of the local importance of universities not only to the cultural life of our towns and cities but to, for instance, local economies, business development, innovation, and research and development. He was absolutely right about that, but he was also right to speak of the importance of securing a degree of consensus about these matters. The last two major reports, the Browne and Dearing reports, straddled a change of Government. I hope that that will not happen on this occasion, but I think it right for us to have an opportunity, between now and the conclusion of the spending review, to engage in a good discussion with, among others, representatives of the sector and politicians on both sides of the House and elsewhere, because I think that such discussions help policy making to evolve.

**Sir Desmond Swayne** (New Forest West) (Con): Reduced fees mean reduced university income—that is why the University of St Andrews caps its Scottish students’ fees at 20%, isn’t it?

**Damian Hinds:** I think the economists say “ceteris paribus”. Universities have a number of income streams, of which fee income is one. As I said earlier, a teaching grant already exists for two in five courses, and the report recommends a rebalancing between fees and teaching grants.

**Wera Hobhouse** (Bath) (LD): Successive Governments have neglected the importance of lifelong learning. This change of emphasis is welcome, but the proposed lifelong learning loan allowance is restricted to a limited range of courses, and mature students may not want to take up a loan late in their careers and lives. Will the Secretary of State consider expanding the allowance to cover a wider range of education and training and to provide grants rather than loans, so that no one is unable to afford the education that they need, even in later life?

**Damian Hinds:** The hon. Lady is right: these are important proposals, and the question of how we provide learning for people later in their life is also important. I am not sure that what is being proposed is quite as narrow as she has suggested, but the current system is rather difficult for people to pick their way through. That applies particularly to the equivalent or lower-level qualification rules—the so-called ELQ rules. They can be a little hard to understand, and that is one of the aspects to which we need to pay close attention.

**Alex Chalk** (Cheltenham) (Con): Earlier this year, I met recent graduates in Cheltenham who indicated to me that, while the degrees they had received were enormously valuable to their life chances, they felt that those degrees could have been provided within a shorter timescale. I know that the Government have legislated for this, but can the Secretary of State assure me that, as part of any review, he will do everything possible to accelerate the provision of cheaper and more effective degrees?

**Damian Hinds:** My hon. Friend does great work on behalf of students in Cheltenham, and I know that he takes a close interest in these subjects. As I said earlier to my hon. Friend the Member for Rugby (Mark Pawsey), I want there to be more diversity and more options. In some instances, it is possible to accelerate degrees. That will work for some people but not others, and in certain courses and subjects but not others. However, I think we should try to stimulate as diverse and as tailored a market as possible.

**Karin Smyth** (Bristol South) (Lab): The Secretary of State has given us warm words about further education colleges, describing them as “vital engines of both social mobility and economic prosperity.” That does not match what we have seen in the report. It highlights the scandalous drop in study at levels 2 and 3 in recent years, which the panel believed was due to funding changes. Will the Government support calls for the restoration of funding at those levels, to remove the barrier to social mobility and help young people and adult learners to improve productivity?

**Damian Hinds:** The hon. Lady is right about the gap between level 3 attainment in our country and the attainment in countries such as Germany. That is a long-standing issue, rather than one that has just arisen. There is also a significant gap at the so-called levels 4 and 5—higher-level technical qualifications, above the A-level or T-level equivalent but below the degree-level equivalent. Our deficit in relation to other countries is particularly striking in that regard. Those are some of the issues that were considered by the independent panel, and we will, of course, consider its recommendations very carefully.

**Paul Farrelly** (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Lab): Most fair-minded Members will regret the tripling of tuition fees and what has happened to student support since 2010. We fought a huge battle over higher education here after I became a Member of Parliament in 2001, and it has been dreadful to see how the system crafted back then has been so comprehensively dismantled. It is now living costs that are often so crippling for students and their families. As a matter of priority, may I ask the Secretary of State what the review’s recommendations will do for families whose incomes are above the limit for all but the basic maintenance loan, and who are by no means wealthy but have two or three children who aspire to go to university?

**Damian Hinds:** The changes that we made in the move to maintenance loans increased the cash support available to young people starting at university by some 10%. There have been subsequent increases of 2.8% and 3.2%, and we have announced a 2.8% increase for 2019-20, as well as making maintenance loans available on a part-time basis. However, we must continue to keep these matters under review, and I welcome the report’s contribution in that regard.

**Ian Austin** (Dudley North) (Ind): Will the Secretary of State meet me or, preferably, come to Dudley, so that he can see how we are making education and skills the
No. 1 priority for the borough? We are aiming to strengthen our economy, building on the brilliant work at Dudley College of Technology, the best college in the country, not just through the new institute of technology—for which we have just received £32 million, and we are very grateful—but through a new high-tech skills centre which will provide university-level qualifications in new high-tech industries? That will enable us to attract new jobs and new investment in exciting areas of the economy for the future, and to replace the jobs that we have lost in traditional industries.

**Damian Hinds:** I am well aware of the high reputation of Dudley College, and of some of the collaborative work that is being done. It is always a delight to meet the hon. Gentleman, and I look forward to doing so again soon.

**Stephanie Peacock** (Barnsley East) (Lab): The Secretary of State has given us warm words about technical education, but does he accept that the reality is frequently a postcode lottery in which towns such as Barnsley have too often lost out? When I met representatives of Barnsley College recently, they told me that many of the first-wave T-levels were simply unavailable. What will change for people in Barnsley as a consequence of the review if there is no funding to follow?

**Damian Hinds:** We are starting in a relatively small way in 2020 with three T-level subjects in a selection of colleges, but that will grow over time. The T-level programme is a national programme, but I think it is right for us to introduce it in a measured way in order to ensure that we get it right as we go along, for the benefit of those young people.

**Ben Lake** (Ceredigion) (PC): I welcome the Secretary of State’s assurance—which I believe he gave in response to the hon. Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Angela Rayner)—that Welsh higher education institutions would be compensated for any spending implications that arose from the review, but does he envisage that being done through the Barnett formula or through full compensation for Welsh institutions? If he inclines towards the former, may I ask him to consider doing the latter instead?

**Damian Hinds:** There are no spending implications today. This is an independent panel review report which feeds into a wider Government review, and—as I have mentioned a couple of times now—we will finalise it later in the year. The funding for the devolved Administrations, including funding through the Barnett formula, will apply in the normal way, as per the statement of funding policy. It will then be up to the Government and the devolved Administrations to decide on the allocation of that money in the light of competing demands.

**Peter Kyle** (Hove) (Lab): As chair of the all-party parliamentary group on further education and lifelong learning, I can welcome and celebrate many parts of the report. However, as someone who went to the University of Sussex as a mature student, experienced for the first time in my life an institution that saw potential in me, and worked hard to fulfil that potential—whether it has been successful or not is up for debate—I am worried about the possibility that we will enter a world in which further and higher education will be pitted against each other in a zero-sum competition. Can the Secretary of State reassure the House that whatever the recommendations are, he will never allow that to happen?

**Damian Hinds:** I pay tribute to the hon. Gentleman and the work of his all-party parliamentary group. We must not allow different parts of our education system to be pitted against each other, and I can give him an absolute commitment not to do so. In fact, as he will know through his work, there is already a great deal of cross-over between what higher education institutions do and what further education institutions do, but they are both incredibly important parts of the overall system.

**Thangam Debbonaire** (Bristol West) (Lab): Does the Secretary of State not agree with me that ensuring that free or low-cost high-quality childcare was available on demand for parents who need it to go to college or university would be transformative for women’s lives? If he does agree, will he commit to properly fund early years education and high-quality childcare for children of all ages, and to do so properly on the supply side, so that women can get training or qualifications and develop their potential and we can make progress in closing the gender earnings gap?

**Damian Hinds:** I was worried when I saw the hon. Lady pick up what looked like a novel, but it turned out only to be a question in a notebook, albeit a very important question about childcare. Of course this Government are investing more than ever before in early years and childcare. I will have to write to the hon. Lady on the specifics of support for students, but I absolutely agree that childcare is a very important consideration for many people.

**Paul Blomfield** (Sheffield Central) (Lab): I wonder if I can give the Secretary of State the opportunity to answer a question he has sidestepped so far. He said in his opening remarks:

> “The panel’s recommendations on student finance are detailed and interrelated, and cannot be considered each in isolation.”

If the Government accept the recommendation to reduce the fee cap, will the Secretary of State commit to the Augar recommendation to “replace in full the lost fee income by increasing the teaching grant, leaving the average unit of funding unchanged”?

**Damian Hinds:** I believe that Ministers used often to stand at this Dispatch Box and say, “I refer the hon. Gentleman to the answer I gave a few moments ago,” but the Gentleman has just been good enough to repeat it so I do not have to. All these things—the various terms of repayment, the level of the fee, the T-grant top-up and so on—are interrelated; of course they have to be considered in the round and we will do so when we come back with our response.

**Daniel Zeichner** (Cambridge) (Lab): There is much to welcome in this review, not least the proposals to tackle the neglect of those who do not go to university, but the universities are right to worry about the proposals for differential funding for different courses, which the Secretary of State appeared to speak quite warmly of a few moments ago. Universities are different; they are not all the same—they have different strengths and different roles—and they are best placed to determine
how to allocate resources, so can the Secretary of State reassure us that he respects and understands university autonomy?

**Damian Hinds:** I not only respect and understand but celebrate university autonomy. I think the hon. Gentleman represents a university city so I am slightly surprised at his question, because of course different subjects attract different amounts of money right now, and quite markedly different amounts of money. For example, a great deal more teaching grant goes into medicine than other subjects. The independent panel review report suggests there should be a different balance in the cap on overall fees and therefore how much variability there would be in the T-grant, but it is not introducing that principle for the first time.

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**Political Process in Northern Ireland**

6.2 pm

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

As the House is aware, on 26 April we announced a new phase of political talks aimed at restoring the institutions set out in the Belfast agreement on a sustainable basis. We said then that we would review progress at the end of May. I wish to confirm to the House that we have done so and have concluded that talks should continue and intensify.

Since the talks process started on 7 May, I have held a number of roundtable meetings involving party leaders and, as appropriate, the Irish Government in accordance with the well established three-stranded approach. In addition, working groups have been meeting regularly over the past four weeks led by current and former senior officials from the Northern Ireland civil service. These working groups have covered issues in five areas: the programme for government; transparency, accountability and the operation of the Executive; reform of the petition of concern; rights, language and identity issues; and improving the sustainability, stability and operation of the Belfast Good Friday agreement institutions as a whole. The process has made good progress thus far, and there is now a genuine but narrow window to reach agreement.

First, let me say that it is my belief that there is a genuine will among the parties to reach an agreement and to return to devolved government. I am grateful for the constructive manner in which they have engaged with this process, and with each other, to date, and I am hopeful that that collective leadership will continue through the next phase of talks.

Secondly, on the substance of the talks, it is clear that there are a number of areas in which a consensus can be found across a range of issues, but there remain real and substantial areas of disagreement. The issues that the parties are grappling with are complex and sensitive. They have approached them in a spirit of engagement and with a willingness to find solutions. I have said from the outset of this process that it is important that the parties have the space to discuss these issues, to build trust and relationships and to find common ground and compromise, and that continues to be the case.

However, I am under no illusions. The people of Northern Ireland need and deserve to see functioning political institutions up and running and to have decisions taken by locally accountable, democratically elected representatives. So while the prospects for agreement are real, the window for agreement is narrow. The Government remain willing to do what is necessary to make this talks process a success. It will, however, take continued good will, engagement and leadership across the parties to reach agreement.

Northern Ireland is a part of our United Kingdom with tremendous strengths and even greater opportunities. Today, unemployment in Northern Ireland is at record lows while employment is at record highs. The economy is growing, tourism is booming. Northern Ireland is a great place to live, work, do business and invest. But it could be doing even better. Central to that is political stability and the restoration of all the institutions in the Belfast agreement.
The appalling killing of Lyra McKee in April was a stark reminder of the importance of ensuring that the hard-won peace and stability in Northern Ireland is not put in jeopardy. There is a responsibility on us all—the Government and those of us in this House and the other place, and the Northern Ireland parties themselves—to ensure that that does not happen. That requires renewed faith in the ability of the institutions of the Belfast agreement to deliver for the people and businesses of Northern Ireland. This process presents an opportunity to build that renewed faith, and I commend this statement to the House.

6.7 pm

Tony Lloyd (Rochdale) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for prior notice of her statement. Like her, I think it is right and proper to mention, these weeks on, the murder of Lyra McKee. I say that partly because I also want to mention the targeted and malign attempt to murder a Police Service of Northern Ireland officer in Belfast in recent days. This House, this country of ours and these two islands have to recognise that tensions are rising as we speak, and those tensions must be dealt with and a constitutional means of challenging those who would do us harm is the right and proper way to proceed.

The Secretary of State spoke with some optimism about the situation and that reflects the conversations I have had with those closely involved in the talks process. People say to me that there is a credible mood that all parties are searching for solutions, and I applaud that and commend those who engage in those endeavours. However, the Secretary of State also said that there is only a very narrow window in the political calendar. She is right, and that narrow window will close in the not too distant future.

In the meantime, many things in Northern Ireland are simply not going in the right direction. Decisions are not being made that would be being made in any other part of this country of ours. We have discussed education and health in this Chamber before, and I want to mention the Derry and Strabane city deal; making it come into operation with the match funding depends on having a functioning Executive. These things really do require an Executive and the people of Northern Ireland are paying a high price for the fact that that does not exist.

So there is pressure; there is pressure on local politicians, but frankly there is pressure on the Secretary of State and on the Tánaiste Simon Coveney, who I know has, along with the Secretary of State, been attentive in making sure that he was present at those talks. However, the Secretary of State did not mention the Prime Minister or the Taoiseach. I appreciate that the Prime Minister will be in office for only a limited time, but it is still an office of profound importance and her capacity to influence the talks process is real. I hope that she will engage with this in her last few days in office, and that her successor, whoever that might be, will also commit to the talks process. It would be more than a shame to miss that opportunity.

The Secretary of State said that there would be no running commentary on the talks process, and that is right and proper, but we know that there are substantive issues that still divide the parties. Are those issues being addressed in the working group? I am not asking whether they exist in the working group; I am asking whether we are moving towards tangible solutions to the questions that divide the parties. I will not go through a whole list of the issues, but the petition of concern has been recognised by most of the parties as an area in need of reform. I say to the Secretary of State in good faith that there is a possibility that some of those issues would be better dealt with in Westminster if they cannot be dealt with through the Stormont process, and she knows that the Opposition will assist the Government in that process if she takes that route. Will she tell us whether there are areas in which it might now be appropriate to consider Westminster legislation?

Finally, I know that the Secretary of State had consultations last week on the results of the inquiry into historic institutional abuse. Will she update the House on that today? We have said before that the victims of that abuse deserve recognition, resolution and justice, and it would be unconscionable if, in the middle of an optimistic talks process, their plea and their plight were lost.

Karen Bradley: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his offer of support for the process that we are going through. I know that he speaks regularly to the parties in Northern Ireland, and that he has offered his support and that of his party to enable those parties to find the space they need. We have to be clear that these are difficult issues, and there will need to be give and take on all sides in order to reach an accommodation. That will require difficult decisions to be taken, but they will be taken for the right reasons and I am grateful for any support that he can give.

The hon. Gentleman was right to refer to the attempt on the life of the PSNI officer over the weekend, but it would be inappropriate for me to comment on the operational details. This once again reflects the real threat faced by police officers, prison officers and others in Northern Ireland. We should be clear that there is no excuse for the behaviour of the dissident terrorists who carry out these activities. They cannot hide behind a lack of devolved government or any other issue to excuse their behaviour. They are the only ones responsible for it, and there is no excuse for it. The hon. Gentleman is right to highlight the fact that those issues exist in a way that they simply do not exist in his constituency or in mine.

The hon. Gentleman rightly talked about the optimism and positive mood of the talks. There is no doubt that all the parties have approached the talks in the right frame of mind and with the right determination. He was also right to say that there is a narrow window in which we can deliver. He will know that the issues being discussed in the programme for government working group are issues of concern to people in Northern Ireland that devolved government can deliver for them in a way that no other governance arrangements can deliver.

The hon. Gentleman talked about the city deals. The Derry and Strabane city deal has just been announced, and the heads of terms for the Belfast city deal were signed in April this year. Of course the Government will do everything they can to deliver those city deals. They rightly include initiatives by the councils themselves, as is the case across the whole of the United Kingdom, but he is right to say that certain powers will need to be devolved to Stormont to the councils to enable them to deliver, and that match funding will be required.
The hon. Gentleman talked about a role for the Heads of Government. It was the Prime Minister and the Taoiseach who carried out the review on the progress of the talks this weekend, and who issued a statement asking for the talks to continue and intensify. I want to assure him that the Prime Minister is very much engaged in this matter. She receives regular updates and is willing to do whatever she can; she is determined to ensure that devolved government is restored, because that is what the people of Northern Ireland need.

The hon. Gentleman talked about addressing the issues, and about the petition of concern. As I have said, a working group has been working on the reform of the petition of concern in a 90-Member Assembly, in order to deal with concerns about how the petition of concern has operated in the past. Of course we in Westminster stand ready to take forward any legislative changes that are needed. Some of the things that are being discussed would require amendment of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 itself, and of course this Government are ready to legislate where necessary. However, these are devolved matters that need agreement of the parties and cross-community agreement, and that is what we are working to achieve.

Finally, the hon. Gentleman asked about the historic institutional abuse inquiry, and I want to assure him that I am working relentlessly to make progress on that matter. As he knows, the problem was that Sir Anthony Hart reported to the Executive after the Executive had collapsed. Despite all the efforts to restore the Executive since January 2017, that simply has not been possible, and in the absence of ministerial direction on the approach to Sir Anthony’s recommendations, it is difficult to bring forward any legislation that would be robust and that would deliver for the victims. I have met those victims, and I want to deliver for them as quickly as we possibly can. The hon. Gentleman will know that David Sterling carried out a consultation in the absence of Ministers to enable us to get the evidence we need for whatever the robust legislation that will deliver would look like, and that process has led to a number of questions being raised that need ministerial direction. I am grateful that the parties are working with me to come up with a unified, all-party approach to questions on the make-up and powers of the redress board, for example, and on whether further top-ups are required for those people who have already received civil pay-outs. These are fundamental questions that need answers, and I am grateful that the parties are helping me to develop final legislation on this matter so that we can take it through in whatever place is most appropriate to ensure that it is delivered as quickly as possible for those victims.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. This is a matter of the utmost importance and I want to accommodate everybody, but I gently point out to the House that there are several hours of debate on subsequent business to follow, so economy is of the essence.

Sir Mike Penning (Hemel Hempstead) (Con): The Secretary of State mentioned the brave and fantastic work of the PSNI and the prison service, and the risks that their members run. May I remind her that there are also British Army battalions based in Northern Ireland, and that we need to ensure that they are being looked after as well? She also mentioned the five points. If there is agreement on only four of them, can we hold out forever and a day to get a guaranteed agreement on all five of them. There must be a backstop. There must be a situation in which those in the negotiations know that if they do not sort this out, there will be direct rule.

Karen Bradley: I am sorry that my right hon. Friend is disappointed that there are only five points. There are five areas in which discussions are taking place, within which there will be areas of consensus in all the working groups as well as areas that do not yet have consensus. We are working hard to achieve that consensus. I want to see us reach a point at which all the parties in Northern Ireland can confidently go into an Executive that they know is sustainable and will deliver for the people of Northern Ireland, and at which all the institutions of Northern Ireland established under the Belfast agreement are properly constituted.

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): I thank the Secretary of State not only for giving me advance sight of her statement but for meeting me earlier to provide a briefing on the situation in person. That was definitely appreciated. I agree with what she said about the appalling killing of Lyra McKee. That has been a stark reminder of the importance of ensuring that the hard-won peace in Northern Ireland is not jeopardised. We have only to look at the attempt on the life of a PSNI officer at the weekend to be reminded of the fragility of that peace. She is right to say that there is a responsibility on us all—the Government, the parties in this place and the Northern Ireland parties themselves—to ensure that the peace is not jeopardised, and the tone and manner in which we debate these issues is of the utmost importance. The SNP and I wish her well in delivering the hopes of all in Northern Ireland in the coming weeks.

Given the narrow window of which the Secretary of State speaks and the criticism of the level of intensification of the talks yesterday, with previous talks in Northern Ireland involving round-the-clock discussions, when will the Government seek to ramp up the intensity? Have the Governments outlined to the parties what actions they will take if the current talks are unsuccessful? What progress has been made on the reform of the petition of concern, which has the potential to unlock various other areas of disagreement?

Reports in the Belfast Telegraph this morning suggest that the backstop will form a key part of the negotiations between the DUP and the UK Government over a new confidence and supply agreement. Given what I will call the “divergent” views of the Northern Ireland parties on the backstop and Brexit itself, is the Secretary of State concerned that the anticipated confidence and supply negotiations may undermine and overshadow any progress made during the current talks?

Karen Bradley: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his support. I was pleased to be able to sit down with him to discuss the role that he can play. He is quite right to talk about the tone and manner in which we discuss such matters. Speculation about what may or may not be matters of consensus or disagreement—this is not directed at the hon. Gentleman—does not help in this situation.
If what we all want is the restoration of devolution, it is important that we do not speculate or try to second-guess, and that we allow the parties the space they need.

As for the intensity of the talks, we have already changed our approach following the statement from the Prime Minister and the Taoiseach over the weekend. The working groups have done great work, but we are now elevating the issues to leadership level, and this week is about airing those matters and intensifying the talks. I do not want to consider what might happen if the talks fail, because we cannot give anyone an excuse for failure. This is about how to succeed and get government restored.

Finally, the hon. Gentleman referred to the Government’s confidence and supply arrangements and Brexit, and I want to be clear that Brexit is not a part of the discussions. The talks are about how we re-establish government to deliver for the people of Northern Ireland on the issues that are Stormont’s responsibility. The confidence and supply arrangement is something for the usual channels.

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): Civic society in Northern Ireland wants somebody to bang people’s heads together to ensure that the talks do not fail and that devolution is put back on its feet. In thanking my right hon. Friend for her statement, may I ask her what scope may exist to identify a George Mitchell-like character who could fulfil that role, act as an honest broker and ensure that the flame of hope that was lit with the sad and tragic murder of a journalist is not extinguished on the altar of intransigence?

Karen Bradley: My hon. Friend is right to talk about civic society, which has played a role in the talks so far. We have had engagement with Church leaders, who have had their own initiative to get the party leaders together with civic society. Representatives of civic society have also had the opportunity to meet the party leaders to discuss their issues with them. The point of that meeting was that, yes, it is important that civic society can make its points to the leaders about what it wants to see government deliver, but it is also important that civic society recognises that everybody will not get what they want on day one. Civic society needs to show the same restraint that we are asking politicians to show.

I am pleased to say that Senator Mitchell visited Northern Ireland a couple of weeks ago, when he was able to come to the talks to add his support for the work that is happening. I want the talks to succeed, and I am prepared to consider anything that will help that. At the moment, however, the mood is right, the atmosphere is right, and we need to keep working hard on that.

Nigel Dodds (Belfast North) (DUP): I thank the Secretary of State for her statement. After the outrage expressed following the killing of Lyra McKee, the attack on the PSNI officer shows the depths of depravity of the terrorists who entirely disregard what the communities are saying. Sadly, they will not desist even if the Assembly is up and running, because David Black was murdered when devolution was going on. Such people need to be tackled resolutely. Will the Secretary of State assure the House that everything is being done to ensure proper co-ordination with the Garda Síochána, and that the police are given the resources and everything they need to tackle this scourge in Northern Ireland?

On the talks themselves, may I ask the Secretary of State to ensure that the three-stranded approach to which she referred is kept sacrosanct, so that Northern Ireland’s internal affairs are a matter for the Northern Ireland parties and Her Majesty’s Government?

Karen Bradley: On the latter point, I assure the right hon. Gentleman that that is the case. He also talked about the threat from dissident terrorists, and he is right that the threat will exist no matter what, but it flies in the face of what people across the community want. We all stand ready to do whatever is required. I spoke to Deputy Chief Constable Martin yesterday, and I continue to offer whatever support is required by the PSNI, which works closely with the Garda Síochána, to ensure that we are all tackling the threat.

Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson (Lagan Valley) (DUP): I know that dealing with the legacy of our troubled past is a priority for the Secretary of State. Further to the point just made by my right hon. Friend the Member for Belfast North (Nigel Dodds), does the Secretary of State agree that those who argue that the PSNI should be required to police the past as well as the present are plain wrong? The police need extra resources, not to devote resources towards things that happened 40 years ago—important though they are for the innocent victims. We need a separate, distinct, focused process to deal with the past, and we must let the PSNI get on with the job of policing the present.

Karen Bradley: The right hon. Gentleman highlights an important point that is one of the reasons why the PSNI is so keen that we make progress in reforming the institutions that deal with the legacy of the past. He will know that we consulted on that, and I will be issuing the summary document of the consultation responses shortly.

Kate Hoey (Vauxhall) (Lab): The Secretary of State knows the importance that the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee, which I am temporarily chairing, attaches to the historical institutional abuse inquiry. In response to the unanimous letter that the Committee sent to her, she said, “I do not want this urgent issue to be delayed or stalled as part of the talks process—quite the opposite.” Will she give us an absolute assurance that the matter will not get bogged down among all the other issues?

In addition—I say this carefully—could the Secretary of State possibly take some press questions the next time she makes a statement? It looks bad when she does not answer any questions while the Foreign Secretary of the Republic of Ireland answers questions for half an hour.

Karen Bradley: I congratulate the hon. Lady on her temporary role as the acting Chair of the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee. She is doing an excellent job, and I have been following her progress closely.

I assure the hon. Lady that I am working on the matter of historical institutional abuse in parallel. It is not part of the talks progress, but I need the parties to work with me. The parties include the Ministers who will operate the scheme, so we need to know that the redress scheme is operable and works for them and, most importantly, for the victims.
Finally, as for the criticism that I have received for making statements to the press while not answering all their questions at every moment, my priority is to see devolution restored, and I am not prepared to do anything that jeopardises that. While I am happy to speak to the press and answer their questions, I do not think anyone gains anything from speculation or the over-analysis of answers.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): Does the Secretary of State agree with me and many people in Northern Ireland that we need all the parties to reach a consensus? There is no point in any single party saying, “Here are our prerequisites and demands. We will not move from them.” That is what Sinn Féin is saying, “Here are our prerequisites and demands. We have the utmost respect for the press—when I was Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, I was an absolute advocate of press freedom—and the press are welcome to scrutinise and question me at length, as they regularly do. But on these matters, I am not prepared to do anything that makes it harder for the right hon. Gentleman’s party and others to do what I know they want to do, which is to go back into government.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Will the Secretary of State outline how she intends to secure the sustainability of the institutions to ensure that never again will we be left in a position where someone can misuse the available mechanisms to bring down devolved government, leaving an entire country—Northern Ireland—rudderless for two-plus years?

Karen Bradley: Of course, the sustainability and stability of the Executive working group has been looking very carefully at these issues. It is not about what I will do to ensure that; it is about what the parties agreed to do. Obviously, if changes to the Northern Ireland Act 1998 are required, the Government stand ready to take those measures. I urge the parties to recognise the need and the public desire to do the right thing and restore devolution. I agree with the hon. Gentleman that nobody wants to see us ever again in this position of two and a half years without devolved government.

Gavin Robinson (Belfast East) (DUP): I thank the Secretary of State, the shadow Secretary of State and all colleagues who mentioned the outrageous attempted murder of my constituent in my constituency on Saturday.

The Secretary of State is right about the need for constructive engagement, and she has fairly reflected that there has been constructive engagement over the past four weeks of this talks process. Although she recognises that consensus is emerging on some issues, the more difficult issues still need to be addressed and the timescale seems quite short.

The Secretary of State knows that the Northern Ireland (Executive Formation and Exercise of Functions) Act 2018 allows a period of five months, which does not expire until August. Without wishing to use all of that time, does she realise that the narrow window may need to be extended to achieve a good result?

Karen Bradley: The hon. Gentleman is right to make the point that the Act expires towards the end of August. The Act has enabled decisions to be taken in the absence of Ministers that could not otherwise be taken, but it does not allow for the decisions that we need to be taken—that requires Ministers. I do not think the people of Northern Ireland want to wait any longer than they have to wait to see government restored.

The hon. Gentleman is right that there are difficult issues that will require a lot of accommodation from all sides in order for us to achieve restored government, which is what we want to see, but I do not think that extending time limits or putting in new milestones helps us to achieve that. What we need to do is to get down to business and get the agreements that we so desperately need.

Paul Girvan (South Antrim) (DUP): We welcome the statement but, to follow on from my hon. Friend the Member for Belfast East (Gavin Robinson), an extension will be required to allow permanent secretaries to make decisions should we not have the Assembly up and running by August, and it is highly unlikely that we will have an Assembly by that stage. In the vacuum that has
been created, as my hon. Friend the Member for North Antrim (Ian Paisley) highlighted, decisions need to be made, and will have to be made, on a number of strategic issues. Will measures be put in place to ensure that, in August, permanent secretaries can move ahead and make decisions?

Karen Bradley: As I said in response to an earlier question, I do not think we should be talking about what happens in the event of failure. That is not what people want to hear. They do not want to hear about the second or third best option; they want to know that the best option of restored government will be achieved.

I know how hard the hon. Gentleman’s colleagues in the DUP are working on this, and I am very grateful for the hard work to date and for the very positive attitude that has been displayed by them and by politicians from across all parties in Northern Ireland. I know how tough this is, and I know how difficult it is. I know this will require a big piece of work over the next few days and weeks, and I am determined that we will do everything we can to deliver that. As I say, there is not a second best option. There is only one option that really works. The risks do not get easier; the risks just increase. We need to deliver for the people of Northern Ireland.

Driving (Persons with Dementia)

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

6.37 pm

Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to require doctors to inform the appropriate driver licensing agency of a diagnosis of dementia; to require drivers diagnosed with dementia to undertake a supplementary driving assessment; and for connected purposes.

This Bill is born out of my personal experience, but I know many other people have similar stories to tell. My Bill sets out to better address just one area of daily life that is impacted for the 850,000 people in the UK currently living with dementia. That number is expected to rise to 1 million by 2025 and to 2 million by 2050. Many families and carers are concerned for their loved one’s safety while driving with the condition, and I am pleased to have received support from many of them.

It is important to say from the word go that this Bill does not seek to prevent those diagnosed with dementia from driving if they can do so safely. Indeed, one in three people with earlier-stage dementia still drives, and it is critical for those diagnosed with dementia to maintain their quality of life and dignity. Driving truly is at the heart of a person’s independence, and it can be hugely difficult to come to terms with its loss. Yet, at the same time, carers and families may have serious concerns about the safety of their loved one and of road users in the neighbourhood, particularly if their loved one lives alone or far from the main family member or carer.

This Bill seeks to make the mechanism for assessing fitness to drive with a dementia diagnosis fairer to both the person with dementia and their family, carers and the local community. Of course, driving is dangerous at the best of times and is not without risk, especially when one is diagnosed with a condition that affects cognitive ability. Although, of course, every individual is different, statistics show an increased risk of dementia patients being involved in road traffic accidents. I do not believe that the current system strikes the right balance in mitigating the risk, and at the moment it only adds to the very difficult process for families trying to help their loved ones make the transition. My Bill seeks to start a conversation about how we can support a person with dementia more compassionately as they come to terms with the impact of such a devastating condition.

The status quo is that the licence holder—the person with the diagnosis—is responsible for notifying the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency or Driver and Vehicle Agency. But some people diagnosed with dementia do not necessarily want to start a process that might ultimately lead to their licence being revoked. It is common for the person with dementia to lack insight into their own loss of capacity. It is also the case that GPs may not be prepared to notify the DVLA, for the same well-intentioned reasons. A GP does not always see their patient behind the wheel, and if they have known the person for years, it is a difficult and unwelcome conversation for them to have, especially given the pressures that we all know frontline GPs work under. I have heard anecdotal stories from GPs who were not prepared to take steps on the driving issue until a dementia patient actually drove into their car in the surgery car park.
My Bill would recognise that a person with dementia might be safe to drive, and would establish a simple mechanism for an assessment to take place. It would therefore become the norm for the DVLA to be notified and for a supplementary test to take place at an appropriate interval following the diagnosis. That would present the patient with the opportunity to actually demonstrate to their carers and the community that they were in fact safe to drive, which would be a welcome outcome for everyone. Should the person be found unsafe to drive, it would be a natural opportunity to help them access the many excellent local transport options, whether Rural Wheels or other services in their community. An end to driving does not necessarily mean an end to an independent, fulfilled life, and I warmly welcome the work that volunteers and local authorities do to provide vital services.

It is a common misconception that the driving test that dementia patients are required to take is the same as the full driving test and, of course, most of us—even if we have been driving for years—would probably not be able to pass the test, let alone someone who is a little older. The supplementary driving assessment looks at the overall impact that dementia is having. It is done in a supportive way and makes some allowances for the bad habits that drivers might have developed. The outcome of the test might suggest modifications to the vehicle or driving behaviour that could extend the period someone could drive safely following a diagnosis.

Under the simple system proposed in the Bill, the clinician or doctor would be required to notify the DVLA automatically, which would then require the person to take the driving assessment at an appropriate juncture. If that were part of the normal process following a diagnosis, it need not be feared. It is only one small practical step, but it would present a wonderful opportunity to talk about how we, as a society more generally, can not only continue to support vital research work to eventually find a treatment for all forms of dementia, but ensure that services are properly resourced in the future.

As we come to the end of the parliamentary Session, I am delighted to have been able to use this opportunity to raise awareness of dementia. Of course, other conditions can have similar impacts on one’s ability to drive and I do not believe other disabilities should be treated differently from dementia in this regard, but given my personal experience I wanted to raise this specific issue in my Bill. I am pleased to have secured the support of Alzheimer’s Research UK, which has been invaluable in supporting me with the Bill, and I am also delighted that colleagues from across the House are supporting me, including the chair of the all-party parliamentary group on dementia.

I hope the Bill will encourage a conversation about how we can better support those with dementia and address the wider impacts on our society. This is one small part of the jigsaw, but it is a real issue that many families face every day. Such impacts might not necessarily come immediately to mind, but are emotionally just as painful as others. The Bill seeks first and foremost to encourage that conversation, and I commend it to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered,

That Rachel Maclean, Antoinette Sandbach, Sir David Amess, Eddie Hughes, Anne-Marie Trevelyan, Vicky Ford, Simon Hoare, Jack Brereton, Jack Dromey, Nic Dakin, Jim Fitzpatrick, and Debbie Abrahams present the Bill.

Rachel Maclean accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time tomorrow, and to be printed (Bill 394).
Wild Animals in Circuses (No. 2) Bill
Consideration of Bill, not amended in the Public Bill Committee.

New Clause 1

**MEANING OF WILD ANIMAL**

‘(1) In this Act, “wild animal” means an animal other than one of a kind that is commonly domesticated in Great Britain.

(2) For the purpose of subsection (1), an animal is of a kind that is domesticated if the behaviour, life cycle or physiology of animals of that kind has been altered as a result of the breeding or living conditions of multiple generations of animals of that kind being under human control.

(3) In this section—

“animal” has the meaning given by section 1(1) of the Animal Welfare Act 2006.’—[Philip Davies.]

This new clause adds a more detailed explanation for terms used within the bill.

Brought up, and read the First time.

6.46 pm

Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): I beg to move, That the clause be read a Second time.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton):
With this it will be convenient to discuss the following:

New clause 2—**Meaning of other key terms**—

‘In this Act—

“circus operator”, in relation to a circus, means—

(a) the owner of the circus,

(b) any person, other than the owner, with overall responsibility for the operation of the circus, or

(c) if neither of the persons mentioned in paragraph (a) or (b) is present in the United Kingdom, the person in the United Kingdom who is ultimately responsible for the operation of the circus;

“officer”, in relation to a body corporate, means—

(a) a director, manager, secretary or other similar officer of the body corporate, and

(b) any person purporting to act in any such capacity;

“travelling circus”—

(a) means a circus which travels, whether regularly or irregularly, from one place to another for the purpose of providing entertainment,

(b) includes—

(i) a circus which travels as mentioned in paragraph (a) for the purpose mentioned there, despite there being periods during which it does not travel from one place to another,

(ii) any place where a wild animal associated with such a circus is kept (including temporarily).

This new clause would prevent the issue of new licences, or the addition of animals to existing licences, from the day the Act is passed.

New clause 5—**Powers of seizure: animals**—

‘Where an animal is seized under paragraph 7(k), an inspector or a constable may—

(a) remove it, or arrange for it to be removed, to a place of safety;

(b) care for it, or arrange for it to be cared for—

(i) on the premises where it was being kept when it was taken into possession, or

(ii) at such other place as he thinks fit.’

This new clause would enable an animal which has been seized to be removed and cared for appropriately.

Amendment 1, in clause 1, page 1, line 15, leave out subsection (5).

Amendment 3, in clause 4, page 2, line 14, leave out “2020” and insert “2022”.

This Amendment will enable circuses to have enough time to plan for the Act coming into force.

Amendment 4 to the schedule, page 3, line 5, at end insert—

“(1A) A police constable shall be considered to be an inspector for the purposes of this Act.”

This amendment would allow a police constable to have the same powers as an appointed inspector with respect to the Act.

Amendment 5, page 4, line 38, leave out “except” and insert “including”.

This amendment would allow animals, held by those who are suspected of committing an offence under the Act, to be seized.

Amendment 2, page 4, line 40, at end insert—

“(7A) An inspector may require that the owner of a wild animal may not destroy the animal unless with the permission of a qualified veterinarian.”

Philip Davies: It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Madam Deputy Speaker.

I know that we have three hours allocated for consideration, but I do not intend to detain the House for so long. Members will be relieved to learn, [Hon. Members: “Hear, hear.”] That is one of the most popular things I have ever said in the Chamber. There is some important Back-Bench business to come and I am sure that we want to get on—

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): It has been pulled.

Philip Davies: That changes things. We are in business now. I do not, however, intend to detain the House for long, and I do not intend to press any of the new clauses or amendments to a Division as they are probing in nature. One of the points that I always make is that we should properly scrutinise legislation that comes before the House. Even when we have a Bill with a worthy title it is always important that we scrutinise the detail, because these are important matters. They are important for the circuses, and for the animals. They are clearly at the forefront of what the legislation is intended to protect, and therefore it is important to check that we are doing everything right.

The hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard) has also tabled some amendments, but I will concentrate on those I have tabled. In passing, I will say that some of the points he makes are worthy of
consideration and I hope that the Minister will do so, even if he is not prepared to accept the amendments today. I hope that in the other place some proper scrutiny will be given, so I do not expect that we will have a ding-dong on these issues tonight.

I am a great admirer of the Minister and not just because of his time in Parliament: we used to work together at Asda many moons ago. Obviously, he was much more senior than I was, and far better at his job—that will not come as any surprise to anyone. We worked on projects together in our time at Asda, and he has taken his common-sense approach there into his ministerial responsibilities. It is great to see him in his place, and all I ask of him—he is a reasonable man—is that he goes away after the debate and considers all the new clauses and amendments to see whether the Government want to have another look at them when the Bill reaches the other place.

New clause 1 addresses the meaning of the term “wild animal”, and would add a more detailed definition to the Bill. The wording I have used mirrors that in the Wild Animals in Travelling Circuses (Scotland) Act 2018, and will thereby enable consistency around the UK. Simply falling into line with the law in Scotland has advantages in and of itself—as a Unionist, I think it is good and always a positive when we have the same laws in England and Wales as we have in Scotland—but more importantly it would provide more clarity to what is otherwise a rather vague description of a wild animal.

The Bill currently states simply that a

“wild animal’ means an animal of a kind which is not commonly domesticated in Great Britain”,

but the new clause delves deeper into what that actually means. Specifically, it would add an explanation of what a domesticated animal is, by stating that an animal “is domesticated if the behaviour, life cycle or physiology has been altered as a result of the breeding or living conditions of multiple generations of animals of that kind being under human control.”

It can reasonably be argued that many of the animals that currently reside in the two circuses to which the Bill will be relevant fit into that definition of a domesticated animal. Given that some of the animals are from the seventh generation of their line to be born into the circus environment, their very nature and general behaviour will be much altered compared with their native wild counterparts. Thus, the term “domesticated” would be made relevant to the specific animals, which should be at the forefront of our minds. That point often seems to be lost in debates on this subject.

For the specific animals we are talking about that are currently in these circuses, it would be more unkind to release them into what many would assume to be their natural habitat, because generations of living under human supervision will have left them without the traditional instincts and abilities necessary to survive in the wild. We describe these animals as wild when they quite clearly could not survive in the wild, and to that extent they are not wild animals. They do not have the traditional instincts and abilities required for them to survive in a habitat that is different from what they are currently accustomed to. They have no knowledge of anything different.

The whole point of new clause 1 is to get into the Bill a more sensible definition that applies to the particular animals involved. It seems to me to be bizarre that on the one hand we are talking about genuinely wild animals and on the other hand we are passing legislation for animals that could not be released into the wild. It is crazy. We want to stop genuinely wild animals being used in circuses—I certainly do; I have no objection to that at all—but the specific animals that are currently relevant are not really wild animals any more.

Like new clause 1, new clause 2 mirrors the provisions of the 2018 Act. If the House agrees to new clause 2, that will provide consistency in the law throughout the UK and more clarity on the definitions of relevant key terms. The Bill currently describes the definition of a circus operator and an officer, but new clause 2 would also define a travelling circus, which is a key part of the legislation, and the fact that it is not currently covered in the Bill, despite the title suggesting that it applies specifically to the circus industry, is not only concerning but leads to a lot of potential loopholes. Many forms of entertainment involve animal participation at their heart and I have heard people discussing their wish to use this legislation as a Trojan horse to affect other industries in which animals are trained.

Many forms of entertainment involve at their heart the participation of animals that have been trained and bred for a particular purpose. For example, I am very keen on the horse-racing industry. I am pretty sure, Madam Deputy Speaker, that at this point I should refer the House to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests. I am not sure whether there is anything relevant in there, but there may well be, so I do so just to be safe rather than sorry. The racing industry has animals that are trained for entertainment and that are bred for that purpose. I might add that they are particularly well looked after, as animal welfare is at the heart of everything that the racing industry does. Throughout the country we have zoos and falconry, and even the more obscure alpaca walking experiences.

My concern is that the Bill does not seem to provide a clear enough definition that separates the circus industry, which the title suggests it is specifically targeted at. As I referred to earlier, this issue has been dealt with in Scotland. New clause 2 would provide the clarity that the Bill needs to ensure that it will not blur any lines and to make sure that the legislation will not be used as a Trojan horse to affect other industries—including those I have mentioned, the greyhound industry and whatever else it might be—because other people might have some of these industries in their sights. I hope the Minister will reflect on these points and go away and look at the merits of the relevant legislation in Scotland to see whether we might wish to mirror it in England and Wales.

Amendment 1 would leave out subsection (5) of clause 1. In effect, it is consequential on new clauses 1 and 2, and would remove the current set of definitions of key terms to replace it with those that I want to introduce in new clause 2. Rather than anything more substantial, it would just tidy up after the other changes.

Amendment 2 states:

“An inspector may require that the owner of a wild animal may not destroy the animal unless with the permission of a qualified veterinarian.”

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As I said at the start, as I see it the whole purpose of this Bill—the motivation behind it—is to protect the animals. We must not do anything that will have a negative impact on animals—we often see unforeseen and unintended consequences of legislation—so it is important to make it clear that the owner of the so-called wild animals covered by the legislation may not destroy an animal without a vet’s permission. We cannot have a situation in which the animals cannot be used in a circus and are therefore put down. That would be completely unacceptable. I am not suggesting for a minute that that is the intention of the people who own the animals—absolutely not, and quite the reverse. I am not casting any aspersions on them at all, but it is important to have this safeguard in the Bill to make sure that we nail it down and prevent that from happening.

Amendment 2 would add to the list of powers that the inspector of travelling circuses will have. It would ensure that animals that will no longer be able to participate in any aspect of circus life will not be put down as a result of the legislation coming into force. As I said, that is not to suggest that the owners of the animals are likely to be so callous. The point is that if people suggest, as it seems they have, that what the circus owners do to these animals is cruel, why would those people, who have pressed for the legislation because they think that circus owners are cruel to the animals, then trust the circus owners to look after the animals when they are no longer able to use them in their circuses? Either these circus owners are cruel to the animals and therefore cannot be trusted to care particularly well for them in retirement, or they are not cruel, in which case I am not entirely sure why we are going down this route in the first place.

It seems to me that the argument that the Minister may well have is that, well, these people look after their animals really well. I think he has made it clear in the past—he will correct me if I am wrong—that there has never been any question about the welfare of the animals in these circuses. I am happy to be corrected by anybody, but as far as I am aware no one has suggested at any point that there has been any problem with the welfare of the animals. If there were problems, there are rules to deal with them. This is not about the welfare of these animals; no one has a question about that as far as I can see. It is about the principle of whether the animals should be used for this purpose, even though they have been bred and trained for it—they cannot be untrained. Obviously they will not be used for any other purpose, and they will not be released into the wild, so what will be done with them? They will just live a life in retirement. My amendment is about making sure that they are able to enjoy a long and fulfilled retirement.

7 pm

Clearly, it would not be right to destroy an animal that is deemed fit and healthy by a vet simply because it has no further purpose within the circus industry—a lifestyle that, in many cases, it would not know from any other form—or because there is no alternative location for it to rehomed in following its seizure from the circus. I would be interested to hear what plans the Minister has to ensure the welfare of these animals in retirement if, for any reason, the circus owners and operators are not fulfilling their duty. Surely just banning these animals from being used in circuses cannot be an end in itself. The end has to be that the animals are particularly well looked after in retirement. It is the animals that I am more interested in than the circuses.

Amendment 3 is a probing amendment that changes the date that the Act comes into force from 2020 to 2022. Basically, it will flag up whether the Minister thinks there is a case—if he does not, we would like to hear what he thinks—for delaying this Bill coming into force by extending it to January 2022. This would give time to the two current circuses that I think are in operation to make preparations and alternative arrangements for the animals. It would also give time for them to come up with an alternative business model. I am not entirely sure how important these animals are for the viability of the circuses—perhaps the Minister can shed some light on that. Given that the circuses have been acting completely within the law and given that everybody has made it clear that the welfare of the animals is not in question, it is clear, as far as anyone can see, that the circus operators have not done anything wrong. People may not agree with the use of animals in circuses, but given that it is allowed, and given that these circuses look after them well, it seems to me that the Government have just decided to do this despite the fact that it may well put circuses in a great deal of financial difficulty—it may not, I do not know.

I hope that the Minister will be able to enlighten me because I am sure that he has looked into this point. Of course we do not want circuses to suffer undue hardship because we want them to have the money to look after the animals in retirement. We need them to be financially viable to make sure that the animals are properly looked after. It seems to me that there may well be a case for giving them an extra 18 months or two years to prepare for this and to have an alternative business model. They will also have the time to make sure that the animals are sufficiently cared for and provided for. The figure and the timescale are arbitrary. This is merely a probing amendment to tease out from the Minister why he thinks the timescales that are currently envisaged in the Bill are right. At the end of the day, we must make sure that we do not have the unintended consequence of the animals not being looked after properly because this Bill was rushed.

I think that that pretty much covers my amendments. I look forward to hearing from the shadow Minister because I am genuinely interested in his amendments and believe that there is some merit in them. If he does not mind my saying so, I am particularly keen on new clause 5, which would enable an animal that has been seized to be removed and cared for appropriately. That is a very good point, because, at the end of the day, this is all about the animals.

I hope that the Minister will consider these points in good faith and perhaps, in another place, think about whether he wants to support any amendments to the law, particularly to bring us closer in line with what has happened in Scotland.

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): I am glad that we have found parliamentary time in this otherwise packed parliamentary schedule for this really important Bill—because this is a really important Bill. The focus on it and the attendance in the Chamber today should not be taken as a lack of interest in this important area. There is cross-party
support for the Bill. I wish to put on record my thanks to the Minister for the way that he has led this Bill from the Government’s point of view, genuinely listening to the concerns of the Opposition, and particularly the concerns of the stakeholders that we have been giving voice to.

There are currently 19 wild animals in circuses. It has been made clear by the evidence we heard in the Bill Committee that the British public do not want wild animals in circuses any more. They want to see wild animals out of circuses. That means that the six reindeers, four zebras, three camels, three raccoons, one fox, which is still not for hunting, one macaw and one zebu need to be freed. In doing so, we send a strong message that our values as a country will be put into legislation. This effort was started 10 years ago by the then Labour Government who tried to bring in a ban on wild animals in circuses. Sadly—sadly for many reasons—the general election got in the way and that was thwarted. It has taken us nine years to get to the point where this legislation is being considered by the House of Commons and I am glad that it is.

Labour will support this Bill in principle today, but there are some aspects that we would like to see strengthened. The hon. Member for Shipley (Philip Davies) raised a number of those in his opening remarks for this debate. As soon as this Bill receives Royal Assent, there should be no new wild animals in our circuses in the country. We should send a clear message to circus owners and to the general public that once this Bill has passed, not only will wild animals be banned from 20 January 2020, but no new licences for wild animals will be given by the Government—that is one of the amendments that I will come to in a moment. It is important that we prevent a last hurrah for wild animals in circuses. This is not just about the camels, the zebu and the macaw, but about the risk that we get other wild animals—elephants, tigers, lions and other wild animals that we currently do not have in our circuses—being brought back for a last hurrah. I am talking about a PR stunt by circus operators—those with animals now and perhaps those without—to say that they will give one last push to show a tiger on its back legs and clap, and one last push for people to see horrendous displays. That is not something that the Opposition want, that the Government want, or that the British public want. That will be one of the amendments that I will come to in just a moment.

In travelling circuses, wild animals are carted from one venue to another, sometimes in cramped cages and barren trailers and are taught to perform wholly unnatural tricks, often through fear of punishment. There is unequivocal evidence that wild animals are not suited to the travelling life where they are denied even their most basic needs. Animal welfare groups and Labour Members are concerned that, without extending the powers of entry to the police and without a power to seize wild animals, the enforcement of this Bill will be much more challenging than it needs to be. While this Bill is being brought forward on ethical grounds, Labour believes that we still must champion the welfare of animals through its implementation. Without the powers of seizure it will not be possible to ensure that the welfare needs of these animals are fully met in the future.

Labour’s new clause 4 would introduce a moratorium on issuing new licences and adding any new animals to current licences. The moratorium would come into force on the day the Act is passed to ensure that there is no last hurrah for wild animals in circuses. In Britain, we rightly think of ourselves as a nation of animal lovers, but we have to put that into practice because every wild animal matters. We are sadly chasing the pack, because 45 countries have already banned wild animals in circuses, and Britain is following in their wake. For our animal welfare policy to be a roaring success, we must claw back the ground lost to other countries. We must send a clear message that it is not only from January 2020 that we must ensure there are no wild animals in circuses; there must also be no new wild animals added to travelling circuses in the period between Parliament considering this legislation and its coming into full force.

People in England and the rest of the UK do not want to see wild animals performing in circuses. There is a strength of feeling that has only increased since the Labour Government consulted on the matter in 2009. I am grateful to the Minister for outlining in Committee DEFRA’s latest consultation, which shows continuing and overwhelming support from the British people for banning wild animals in circuses. The interesting thing is that quite a lot of British people already think that there is a ban in place. They already believe that wild animals are no longer allowed to be used for entertainment in circuses, and that tigers, elephants and lions can only be seen in films set in Victorian times that recreate the circuses of old. But that is not necessarily the case. Wild animals can be used in circuses if the Government grant a licence.

The moratorium we are proposing is so important because it sends the message that there will be no new wild animals—no tigers, lions or elephants—appearing in our circuses. We need to put this idea into practice. I have spoken to the Minister and I hope that he will take seriously the concerns about the intervening period raised by the Opposition so that we can prevent a last hurrah. I am open to having a discussion with him about how best to take such a measure forward. There is overwhelming cross-party support for this measure and this is a genuinely non-partisan effort by stakeholders and the Opposition to ensure that no new wild animals can be put in circuses, and that is the spirit in which the new clause was tabled.

Without new clause 4, there is a possibility that new animals and new species could be introduced between now and the commencement date of the legislation on 20 January 2020. The only restriction in the current licensing arrangement is that the animals must be inspected, and found to be fit and healthy. Unless we make it clear in the Bill that introducing new animals will not be permitted, there will be nothing to prevent additional licences being granted so that wild animals can be taken on tour in the final few months of wild animals being allowed in circuses. I can imagine this being used as a public relations sell on posters up and down the country: “This is the final time to see a lion in our circus.” We must send a clear message from this place today that that is not acceptable.

We cannot have any more big cats in circuses. We do not want any extra zebras or raccoons being brought into our circuses. The public would want the Government
to stop that from happening. Given that there is cross-party support for stopping such behaviour from 2020, the British public would not understand why we would allow more animals for a last hurrah before the legislation came into force. The public do not support wild animals in circuses, and there is strong agreement across the House that this measure should be put in place. I would be grateful if the Minister would look seriously at what can be done to ensure that there is no last hurrah. Under the current licensing arrangements, Thomas Chipperfield toured Wales and England with two lions and two tigers as recently as 2015. The longer that licences can still be issued, the greater the risk that animals could be brought back into circuses, and none of us wants to see that. New clause 4 would simply tidy up the legislation to ensure that that cannot happen.

If the Minister decides not to accept our new clause or to work with us on the issue, he will need to rely on the good will of circus operators. I do not doubt the passion of the circus operators we heard evidence from in Committee, who feel that they love their animals. I genuinely believe that they love their animals. However, the way to demonstrate that love is not to put them on show. There have to be real risks that in the final hurrah—the last few months before the legislation comes into force—there will be an additional sell to try to get more people to buy seats in circus big tops to see the wild animals there. We should not accept that. There is no legal method that the Government could use to prevent licences from being issued if a licence application conformed to the existing rules. The only check is on the welfare of the animal, to ensure that it is being well looked after. If there can be wild animals in circuses under current arrangements, there could also be additional or replacement animals in circuses during the interim period under the current arrangements in this Bill. There must not be a last hurrah for wild animals in circuses.

7.15 pm

Amendment 4, which stands in my name, would extend the powers currently given to inspectors to police constables. Although the Bill provides for certain appointed inspectors to enforce the legislation, animal welfare groups have told us that these powers should be extended to police constables. This is already the case in the Wild Animals in Travelling Circuses (Scotland) Act 2018. Including this in the English legislation would not only ensure that there was minimal difference in enforcement across the UK, but facilitate a quick response to allegations of illegal animal use. Allowing police constables to enforce the Bill, alongside inspectors—we are not seeking to introduce a hierarchy as between police constables and the inspectors—would ensure that any breaches of the legislation were addressed in as timely a manner as possible.

As a minimum, the Opposition would like the Government to include in the guidance associated with the Bill that a police constable could be one of the individuals taken into premises by an inspector appointed by DEFRA under the Act, and that in these circumstances the officer would have the same powers as the inspector. Suitable specialists in wild animals could accompany officers where needed. Since the Ivory Act 2018 passed through Parliament recently and now the Wild Animals in Circuses Bill, there has been a renewed enthusiasm for the skills and expertise of the National Wildlife Crime Unit. I want to put on record my continuing thanks for the work of this very small band of dedicated professionals, who look after animals across the UK. In many cases, it could well be this unit that would help to enforce parts of this legislation. Tidying up the Bill to include constables as well as inspectors could make a very big difference. It is essential for the police to have an explicit role to ensure the welfare of the wild animals. This should be made clear, ideally in the legislation itself; if not, it should be clarified in the accompanying guidance.

My new clause 5 and amendment 5 would ensure that if a wild animal was found being used in a travelling circus—in breach of the ban under this legislation—there would be an opportunity to remove the animal and for it to be cared for appropriately, rather than leaving it in situ. In Committee, we heard evidence from circus operators who said that in some circumstances they would continue to tour with their animals after the ban came into place, because they feared they could not leave the animals in any other environment. Although such actions may adhere to the letter of the law being proposed in this Bill, this could mean a risk of breaching the legislation through future use of the animals for entertainment purposes. In the event of a breach of the ban—in which case there is a risk of wild animals being subjected to continued cruelty by being held in small cages and environments that are not suitable for their continued care—new clause 5 and amendment 5 would ensure that the animals could be seized and appropriately rehomed.

When we were in Committee, I tweeted that I was sure that, as a nation of animal lovers, there would be plenty of people who would want to help rehome these wild animals. And, my word, plenty of people responded on social media. Indeed, the wildlife organisations that have been so good and professional in the advice they have given the Opposition have also said that they would welcome the opportunity to rehome any of the animals, should a home be required for them. I imagine that most people who care for the wellbeing of animals would want to know that the animals could be taken to a place of safety in the event of a breach.

The needs of animals in travelling circuses cannot be met if the animals remain in the travelling circus. We must have the proper mechanisms in place to enforce this legislation so that we can protect their welfare when it comes into effect. The Minister said in Committee that although he understood our concern that in some situations animals might need to be removed from the premises on safety or welfare grounds, such powers were already provided for in existing legislation, so our amendments were not necessary. We disagree with that assessment, which is why we have tabled them again today.

Sections 18 and 19 of the Animal Welfare Act 2006 enable seizure only when animals are in distress or suffering. The Minister’s comments did not address the RSPCA’s concern that there should be a specific power of seizure and rehoming of a circus animal, even if it is not in distress or suffering. That is important, because this Bill is being introduced on ethical grounds, not necessarily on animal welfare grounds. That distinction is really important. Especially if we are to address wild animals being used or transported in travelling circuses in future, we need to make sure that that works on ethical grounds as well as animal welfare grounds, in the spirit of this Bill.
If a wild animal found in a circus is not in distress or suffering at that moment, there is no power to intervene under the Animal Welfare Act, so the animal could not be seized or taken to a place of safety. We have heard from numerous animal welfare organisations how difficult it is to prove cruelty or suffering under the Act, and that this is even more difficult in the case of a circus that is moving from place to place with no published tour schedule, necessarily, beyond the immediate next performances. One of the reasons we would like police constables to have the same powers as inspectors is to help to solve this issue as well.

I hope that the Minister will respond positively to the issues that the Opposition have set out. At this stage of the consideration of the Bill, there is an opportunity to work further on the moratorium proposals to make sure that no new wild animals can be introduced into circuses. The Minister, as the consummate professional I know he is, would certainly be embarrassed if he had egg on his face as a result of more wild animal licences being applied for between now and the commencement date of this legislation. Introducing a moratorium not only makes good political sense but makes good welfare sense for the animals involved. If he could also set out his ambition to include constables either in the legislation or in the guidance, that would go a long way towards addressing the concerns that we have heard from stakeholders along the way.

In conclusion, I would like to draw on some of the words of Professor Stephen Harris, who was the expert commissioned by the Welsh Government to look into the welfare of wild animals in travelling circuses. His report, published in April 2016, provides strong evidence that wild animals in travelling circuses not only suffer poor welfare but do not have a "life worth living". We need to make sure that all animals have a life worth living. If the Minister can look favourably on these amendments in the spirit in which they are tabled, we can move this Bill forward in a spirit of cross-party amendments as well as in the amendments tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Shipley (Philip Davies). As a former Policing Minister, I know that the police will not want an officer to be the sole person with the knowledge to go in and carry out this activity. Let us put that on the record now—they would not want to do that. There is a completely different reaction from members of the public, whether they are running a circus or any other organisation, to an inspector arriving and to an officer of the constabulary arriving, particularly together. That is the sort of reaction that we need to have.

The excellent National Wildlife Crime Unit, which was also under my portfolio, is a small unit, and it might well need some extra resources if it were to take this duty on in general. The principle of that unit means that it is exactly where the power should come from. That should be addressed within the guidance, as it is probably easier for it to be done in that way. This applies to the 43 authorities in England and Wales. Scotland already has legislation just like this Bill. My hon. Friend the Member for Shipley was just telling me that it was actually better, in principle, and we are trying to make this Bill better through some of the lessons that have been learned there.

I absolutely agree that no new animals at all should be allowed into circuses in this interim period. We are trying to go with public opinion, which has changed over the years. My eldest daughter is now 30 years of age.

Philip Davies: Never! She doesn’t look old enough.

Sir Mike Penning: She does not look 30 years of age, as my hon. Friend comments. She said to me when she was about 11 years of age, “Daddy, I'm going to be taken to a zoo by the school, and I don’t want to do that. I don’t want to see animals in cages.” We have never gone to a zoo and never gone to a circus that has had live animals. My youngest daughter is 28 and my eldest daughter is 30. My eldest daughter is now a marine biologist, so the House can probably realise where I am coming from on this. If we are going to make a law that says that we are banning live animals in circuses, let us do that for them, and for the public. If there are animal welfare issues, that can be picked up, but actually over the years it has not been, which is why we are going to ban it ethically now.

Should the animals be taken if they are found in this situation? This is a really difficult grey area that the Minister is going to have to address. Why would someone travel with an animal if they have not been training it and using it? Why would they keep it in its winter quarters when perhaps there are better types of quarters that it could be kept in? If it is travelling, why would they do that if they are not using it within a circus production? I hope that there can be an accommodation in this Bill—whether in this House, around guidance, or as it proceeds to the other House, which will also understand that the public are with us on this—whereby we can do what it says on the tin. This Bill says that we are going to ban live animals in circuses—we are going to protect those animals should they be in a circus.

There will be loads of good will out there regarding these animals. The hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport said that he tweeted out about this—yes, but they have to go to the right place. We are talking about myriad different types of animal that are used within circuses. It is really important that these animals go to a place of expertise to be looked after, because a lot of them may well have been through very stressful procedures. They may have been in a circus nearly all their life and then they are taken to a completely different environment. That takes a degree of professionalism and expertise. That has to be addressed.
in terms of payment, which should come from the circus, as they are the people who are responsible for these animals. They can be passionate about them. I have heard some of the debates in public over the years where they have said, “We love these animals.” I do not doubt that, but we need to say, “If we have a situation where we are going to have to remove animals from you, as an organisation, then it is not right for the taxpayer or a charity to pick up that tab—it is your job.” We need to consider how we can move that forward within the guidance. Perhaps the other House will debate this for a little bit longer.

We are trying, on principle, cross-party and as a nation, to get the animal rights part of this right. My kids—our kids—are driving this forward. It is like the environmental arguments that are going on out there at the moment. They are right, because it is their future, not our future. I have been lucky enough to be in Kenya with the military and have been in most of the safari parks. Seeing an animal in its natural environment coming down to the water hole in the evening because that is what it naturally does is an absolutely moving thing, not like seeing an elephant standing on its back legs in a circus, which is very damaging for the animal.

The House should be very proud of bringing this legislation forward. I would disagree only slightly with the hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport on one thing. The previous Labour Administration had a huge majority—an absolutely enormous majority. They could have got whatever legislation they wanted through this House at any time during that period, but it is a Conservative Government who have brought this through. I am very proud of that, but it should have been brought in years and years ago.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (David Rutley): It is an honour to participate in the debate, and I welcome the genuine cross-party spirit. We are good friends on these issues, and it is good to hear well-informed, well-thought-through opinions, which will add to what we are taking forward. I congratulate the hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard) on setting out his concerns so clearly. We have spoken outside the Chamber, to facilitate further discussions, which shows the cross-party approach we are taking.

Animal welfare is a vital issue for everybody in the Chamber. All Members here have played an important role in trying to secure debates and take forward legislation on this issue. It is time to stop the outdated practice of wild animals performing or being exhibited in circuses. I will go into some technical details, but I think we all agree that we need to move in that direction.

7.30 pm

I will start with new clause 1, new clause 2 and amendment 1, tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Shipley (Philip Davies). I have known him for a very long time. He is an extraordinary orator and a scrutiniser extraordinaire—I am not very good at French, as Members can tell. I have enjoyed working with him in various roles. He got to this place well before me and has made a remarkable and important contribution.

Most of new clause 1 replicates definitions already contained in the Bill. The exception is subsection (2), which would introduce an explanation of the term “domesticated”. I understand the perceived need for clarity, especially given the time spent in Committee on the issue of domestication, and particularly the distinction between exotic and wild animals. My hon. Friend missed some of that debate, but I assure him that we had a detailed debate about those issues.

The Bill mirrors the approach taken in other pieces of English legislation, particularly the Zoo Licensing Act 1981 and the Welfare of Wild Animals in Travelling Circuses (England) Regulations 2012, and consistency with the regulations is particularly important. Changing our approach opens the door to arguments about inconsistency, and in particular whether animals that can currently only be used in circuses under licence are the same animals subjected to this ban.

The definition of “wild animal” was debated at length on Second Reading, as I am sure Members are aware. For the purpose of the Bill, “wild animal” means an animal of a kind that is not commonly domesticated in Great Britain. I would like to reiterate for the sake of clarity that domestication is a genetic selection process across a significant population of animals for specific traits, often over hundreds or thousands of years. This selection process results in clear physical and behavioural changes from the original wild type. If an individual animal of a wild species has been tamed, that does not mean it falls outwith the definition of “wild animal”. As my hon. Friend the Member for Shipley indicated, wild animals in circuses will most likely be tamed, and they have usually been bred for a number of generations within the circus environment. However, individual or groups of tame wild circus animals are still wild animals for the purposes of the Bill. The term “wild animal” is already well established in English legislation, and welfare groups are content that it will cover the animals that we all want to see banned.

I promised in Committee to explain what we mean by “travelling circus” in guidance to the legislation. Should it be necessary, we can provide advice on what is or is not a wild animal in guidance. An example already exists in the form of the Secretary of State’s standards of modern zoo practice, which define what is not normally domesticated. For all those reasons, we do not feel that it is necessary or desirable to elaborate on the term “domesticated” in the Bill. I know that my hon. Friend is not pressing his new clause to a vote, and I urge him to withdraw it, as the question of domestication can be dealt with elsewhere.

Most of new clause 2 replicates definitions already contained in the Bill. In addition, it would add a definition of “travelling circus” to the Bill. The desirability of defining “circus” and “travelling circus” has been debated on Second Reading and in detail in Committee. We have chosen to let the term take its common meaning, which a court will be able to interpret. As I said previously, we are concerned that setting out a specific definition of “circus” might be counterproductive. We have considered a number of definitions, none of which is ideal. If the definition is drawn too widely, it captures activities that we do not intend to ban, such as falconry displays, which we talked about at length in Committee, with accompanying entertainers who might travel from place to place. Conversely, a definition that is drawn too narrowly, by stipulating what features might make up a circus, would allow a circus operator to simply avoid the ban altogether. There are therefore challenges either way.
We believe that, rather than trying to define the term, it is better for the courts to use its common meaning. It has been mentioned that the Scottish Government chose to define “travelling circus” in their circus legislation. We have chosen not to adopt that approach, because it is not clear what the definition of “travelling circus” in the new clause, which is replicated from the Scottish legislation, achieves beyond the current definition, since it goes without saying that a travelling circus is “a circus which travels”. We note that the Scottish legislation does not define the term “circus”.

We have committed to producing detailed guidance—I think that those on the Opposition Front Bench would agree with this—in consultation with welfare groups and police on what activities the Bill will or will not ban. The Government maintain that that is the best place to provide any necessary detail. I spoke with welfare groups during and after the evidence session, and they clearly believe that this is adequate. We are keen to involve them in the drafting of the guidance.

Amendment 1 is a consequential amendment that seeks to remove the definitions provided in the Bill. We believe that the definitions as drafted are appropriate. As I said, we will produce guidance to accompany the Act, explaining what activities are covered by the ban. On those grounds, I hope my hon. Friend feels that those issues have been adequately covered.

I turn to the enforcement powers in the Bill. New clause 5 and amendment 5, tabled by the hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport, seek to provide inspectors with powers to seize animals and to make alternative arrangements for their care. These amendments were considered in Committee—I remember the discussions well, as I assume he does—and, as I explained then, we do not consider them to be necessary or proportionate, but let us take the argument through, and hopefully we will come to some agreement.

The powers of inspection in the Bill ensure that inspectors are able to investigate potential offences properly. They include powers to enter premises, to examine animals, to seize objects and to video or photograph animals. It would never be necessary to seize an animal to prove that an offence had been committed, so these powers are not needed for that purpose. Where there are concerns that animals need to be removed from premises on the grounds of welfare or safety, those powers already exist in other legislation.

As I have explained previously, under the Animal Welfare Act 2006 an inspector may seize an animal if it is suffering or is likely to suffer if its circumstances do not change. If someone is convicted of either causing unnecessary suffering to an animal or failing to provide for its welfare needs, the courts also have a power to disqualify them from owning or keeping animals.

**Liz Twist** (Blaydon) (Lab): There is concern about using two different bits of legislation to solve one problem. Would it not be clearer to cover this issue in the Bill, rather than relying on the Animal Welfare Act?

**David Rutley**: That is an interesting point. It is difficult to get the balance right, but the key thing to remember is that we are discussing an outdated practice that we want to see removed on ethical grounds. Seizure is much easier where there are genuine welfare concerns—I will explain why in more detail—and those powers are contained in the 2006 Act.

If the animal is subject to the Dangerous Wild Animals Act 1976—of those animals currently kept in circuses, only camels and zebras are subject—it may be seized if it is being kept without a licence or if a licensing condition is being breached. There is no need to replicate those powers here. In Committee, concern was raised about repeated breaches of the Act. The courts would have the power to impose unlimited fines, which makes it highly unlikely that a circus would continue to reoffend, for economic reasons.

Powers to seize animals interfere with the peaceful enjoyment of possessions, which is protected by article 1 of protocol 1 to the European convention on human rights. Interferences must be justified and proportionate. That may be easy to do if an owner is mistreating an animal and the powers are being exercised under the Animal Welfare Act, which is the point I was trying to make earlier. However, the objective of this legislation is simply, but importantly, to prevent the use of wild animals in circuses on ethical grounds. Preventing someone from using animals for other purposes, which is what the seizure and deprivation powers do, goes beyond what is necessary to achieve the objectives of the Bill.

**Alex Sobel** (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): I would like some reassurance from the Minister about a circus that operates in my constituency—Circus Mondao—which has a zebra and two camels. I have been campaigning for it to cease the use of these, and I ask that the Bill cover that so that I can happily go to Circus Mondao in the knowledge that, because of this Act, it is not using wild animals.

**David Rutley**: The hon. Gentleman sets things out incredibly clearly, as he has done on others Bills I have been involved in. Absolutely—I can categorically say that, at commencement of this Act, those practices will no longer be able to be taken forward, so his campaign will have come to fruition. I hope that reassures him.

Amendment 4 seeks to extend the enforcement powers in the Bill to police constables. A few points have been made, not the least of which were those made by my right hon. Friend the Member for Hemel Hempstead (Sir Mike Penning), who is passionate about many things, including these issues. I always have a soft spot for Hemel Hempstead because that was where one of my sons was born. We are all talking about our children today.

**Dr David Drew** (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): You just put them in a circus then.

**David Rutley**: I do not know how to take that comment. I think I will move on.

Again, we do not feel that the amendment is necessary if an animal is in distress, when the Animal Welfare Act 2006 already provides powers for the police to respond quickly. The offence we are talking about—a ban on use on ethical grounds; let us keep that in the front of our minds—does not require such an urgent response. It does require a response, but it does not have the same immediacy. It can happen only in the context of a public performance, which will of course take place in a public place. If a travelling circus wanted to break the law, it would have to do so in front of an audience. An inspector could be at the circus in sufficient time, and the schedule provides powers to search for evidence.
As outlined in the schedule, that includes questioning any person on the premises, taking samples and taking copies of documents. Indeed, inspectors can seize anything, except an animal, found on the premises that they reasonably believe to be evidence of the offence in clause 1.

We do not believe it necessary to extend these powers to the police. DEFRA has approximately 50 circus and zoo licensing inspectors, who are qualified and experienced in identifying and, if need be, handling species of wild animals. In fact, in Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Truro and Falmouth (Sarah Newton) made the point that we do have the expertise, and I think it is best to get qualified veterinarians or people with extensive experience of working with captive animals to take care of this work. Few, if any, constables would have that level of knowledge, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Hemel Hempstead pointed out.

In the rare cases where a police presence is needed, as I explained in Committee, the Bill also provides powers for an inspector to take up to two other people with them on an inspection. These could include a police constable, who would be able to exercise, under the supervision of the inspector, the powers of inspection provided in the Bill. Let me assure the hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport and other hon. Members that the guidance DEFRA will issue will also make it clear that police constables are able to accompany inspectors during the inspection, and I have also set that out in writing. I hope that gives him and other Members a greater degree of assurance that the police will be able to play a role, as required.

Luke Pollard: Will the Minister go into slightly more detail about where the guidance will land on that point? Will the police constable be one of the two people who can accompany an inspector, or will that be in addition to those two people, since there may be very good reasons why certain specialists are required for certain animals?

David Rutley: That is a good question, and we will take a closer look at that. At this stage, it would be one of the two people, but that is something we can take a closer look at.

I accept the point that has previously been raised that the Scottish Act provides powers for police constables to enforce the legislation. The Scottish guidance states:

"Although constables are provided powers for enforcement, it is expected that it will primarily be Local Authorities that will enforce the Act as part of other responsibilities relevant to travelling circuses."

Even under the Scottish Act, the police are not seen as the primary inspection force.

Since Committee, DEFRA officials have discussed enforcement of the Bill with the chief constable of Hertfordshire constabulary, Charlie Hall, who is the national policing lead on animal matters. The view of the police is that while they would of course support DEFRA-appointed inspectors, should this be required, they do not want to take on the additional responsibility of being the primary enforcer of what is a very specialist area of business. They see their role as being one of support in keeping the peace when necessary to enable inspectors to conduct the work provided for in the Bill.

Mention has been made of the National Wildlife Crime Unit, and we certainly respect its contributions, but we are concerned here with an offence involving captive wild animals at a travelling circus, so it is unlikely that that group will have a primary role in inspection. That will be for the other inspectors we have talked about.

Sir Mike Penning: There could be a situation in which a wild animal has been inappropriately brought into a circus. We are not talking about everything coming from Africa or Asia; it could, for instance, be a wild animal from the UK, or one illegally imported. There are people who have that area of experience, and all we are asking for in the guidance is that they should be appropriately contacted and their expertise used, should that be needed.

David Rutley: I think that is a perfectly fair point, but the point I am trying to make, to reassure colleagues, is that we have 50 inspectors who are well trained to take care of this. Of course, we would get the police involved at the right time, and we will put that in guidance. We can anticipate that there may be circumstances in which we need to get the National Wildlife Crime Unit involved, and we will set that out as appropriate. Again, I hope that the points I have made give sufficient reassurances to hon. Members, and that the hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport feels that he need not press amendment 4.

I turn to amendment 2, tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Shipley. He seeks to prevent circus operators from euthanising their wild animals, which is something we all want to be avoided, unless they have permission from a qualified vet. Again, I assure him that these issues were raised directly with the circuses during the evidence session. I understand the sentiment behind the amendment, but we have not seen any evidence that current circus operators would seek to euthanise their animals. Indeed, the two remaining circuses have assured us that they would not do so. In oral evidence during the Bill’s Committee stages, Peter Jolly senior was clear that:

“I would change my business to something else, but the animals would stop with me.”—[Official Report, Wild Animals in Circuses (No. 2) Public Bill Committee, 21 May 2019; c. 42, Q107.]

Carol MacManus suggested that the other circus, Circus Mondao, was considering either rehoming its wild animals or keeping them at winter quarters with people to supervise the animals “because we would have to look after the animals.”—[Official Report, Wild Animals in Circuses (No. 2) Public Bill Committee, 21 May 2019; c. 50, Q152.]

They are concerned about their animals and consider them to be part of their family.

I would also point out that, in practice, the amendment would unfairly target circus operators by requiring them to obtain permission from a veterinarian to have an animal euthanised. No such legal requirement exists for pet owners or other owners of working animals who operate a business. As we have discussed, we do not need to seize an animal under the Bill to prove that an offence of using a wild animal in a travelling circus has been committed. The other thing it is important to set out to my hon. Friend is that retirement plans are in
place for these wild animals, and the Animal Welfare Act will of course continue to apply to protect these animals. Once again, I hope that the points I have made will give reassurances to my hon. Friends and to Opposition Members.

New clause 4, as set out by the hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport, aims to prevent new animals from being added to existing licences and to prevent new licences from being passed, and amendment 3, tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Shipley, seeks to allow the circuses two more years on their existing licences. We do not believe new clause 4 is necessary, although I understand what the hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport is seeking to achieve with his amendment—to mitigate the risk of additional wild animals being brought into travelling circuses between Royal Assent and the Bill coming into force on 20 January 2020. New clause 4 appears to be intended to come into force on Royal Assent; I think that is the intention. By convention, there is a strong presumption against commencing any earlier than two months after Royal Assent, because the public are entitled to be given a reasonable period of time to adapt to a change in the law and to reorganise their affairs in response to it. It would be highly unusual to commence a clause such as this on Royal Assent.

Paragraph (a) of new clause 4 seeks to prevent new licences from being issued after the Bill has passed, so it would apply only to new travelling circuses or existing ones that currently do not use wild animals in their performances. If a travelling circus wished to start using wild animals before the end of the current touring season, typically at the end of October—for those who have not been part of this debate, circuses would not continue until 20 January, because they normally stop performing at the end of October—it could technically have a last hurrah, and the hon. Gentleman has made that point with conviction. However, it would have to apply for a licence as soon as the Bill was published to maximise the revenue it would want to get. I reassure hon. Members that DEFRA has received no inquiries from anyone regarding even the possibility of an application for a new licence.

If, however, a new circus decided to apply for a licence, say, next week, DEFRA’s application takes a minimum of six weeks, and for a new circus unfamiliar with the demands of our licensing regime, it could take considerably longer for an application to be determined. Both current licensed circuses, when they first applied for a licence, needed to be inspected twice before their licence was awarded, and those inspections took place at winter quarters, which is an easier place to conduct an inspection; even then, both applications took two months to be approved. Even if a circus were to submit an application for a licence next week, it would be able to use its wild animals for, at most, 14 weeks or three months before the end of the current touring season.

Luke Pollard: That is quite a long time.

David Rutley: The hon. Gentleman says that is quite a long period. It is long enough to take what he is saying seriously. We understand his arguments, but for the sake of completeness, I want everyone to understand the processes.

Paragraph (b) of the new clause would affect circuses already licensed by DEFRA. The two licensed circuses still using wild animals have not said that they have any plans to add further wild animals. Given that a ban will be in place before the next touring season, it would make little economic sense for them to invest in new trained animals or equipment now, and significant changes to a performance require planning, which would usually happen when the circus is at winter quarters, from late October onward. Also, in the unlikely event that a circus sought to add a wild animal to an existing licence, the proposed moratorium would not prevent that from happening between now and the moratorium coming into effect.

I assure the House that that is a highly unlikely scenario. The current 2012 licensing regime would safeguard the animal’s welfare. Existing licence conditions require circuses to provide DEFRA with at least two weeks’ notice of their intention to add a wild animal to their circus, and inspection would follow as soon as possible after the animal’s arrival in the circus. The Government accept that that leaves open the possibility—albeit a very small one—that new animals could be used in travelling circuses for a maximum of 14 or 16 weeks, or just over three and a half months, if the licence application was submitted and approved, unless the proposed early moratorium comes into effect. Although we have had no indication that any circus in the UK would try to make use of such a gap, I understand the concerns expressed by the hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport and my right hon. Friend the Member for Hemel Hempstead. I will take the matter away and, ahead of Committee stage in the Lords, consider how we can ensure that no new wild animals are used in travelling circuses by the time the ban comes into force on 20 January 2020.

On amendment 3, tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Shipley, we believe that circuses have had enough time to plan for the ban. He suggested, I think probingly, that the decision has only just been made; in fact, the legislation has been long in gestation, and the general feeling is that it would have been better had it been introduced sooner. I think we all share that view. It has been difficult to get parliamentary time. Circuses have had six and a half years to prepare, ever since the introduction of the licensing regulations, which contain a sunset clause that made it clear that the ban would be in place by January 2020. We do not believe, therefore, that the amendment is necessary.

The Government have always been clear that the licensing regulations were an interim measure only. It is important to highlight that licences must be renewed every year, and in February last year we reaffirmed that any license issued to circuses this year would be the last, because a ban would be in place by the time the interim regulations expired on 20 January 2020. The coming into force date of the Bill aligns with the expiry date of the regulations, which means that the two circuses will be able to update and plan their routines for next year while they are not on tour, as the majority of circuses would do anyway.

It should not be too difficult for the circuses to replace the wild animal elements of their shows. DEFRA has been inspecting these circuses at least three times a year for the last six and a half years. Our inspections show that the animals, where they are used, are used for
only about five to ten minutes as part of a two-hour show. As long as the ban comes into force during the winter season, which has always been the Government’s intention, we believe that the two circuses have enough time to adjust their routines. Indeed, there are about 25 circuses in the UK and Ireland that do not use wild animals in their show, and they operate successfully. They show what can be done. To reassure my hon. Friend further, comparisons with ticket prices in other travelling circuses that do not use wild animals do not show a premium for seeing or involving wild animals.

I should add that the amendment does not reflect the fact that the interim licensing regulations expire next January. The amendment would therefore permit wild animals to be used in travelling circuses for two years—that is, to 2022—with a much lower level of scrutiny than they have been subjected to for the last seven years. In those circumstances, I would certainly share the concerns about more wild animals being introduced into travelling circuses. A two-year moratorium, with no DEFRA licence required at all, could well lead to more wild animals being used in travelling circuses. That is not something this Government would agree to.

I hope I have made it clear why the Government believe that next January is an appropriate date for the ban to come into force, and that hon. Members in all parts of the House are reassured by my comments. I hope my hon. Friend feels that it would be best were he not to press his amendment.

Philip Davies: I thank the Minister for an extremely thorough response to the amendments tabled by me and the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard). People will now see why I speak so highly of my hon. Friend, not just in his time as a Minister but in his time at Asda. His courteous, serious and thorough treatment of all the amendments does him credit and shows why he is such a fantastic Minister, and I am grateful to him. I am pretty sure that he will discuss these matters further with the shadow Minister and me before the Bill goes to the Lords.

As the Scottish National party Chief Whip, the hon. Member for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady), is present, I should restate my view that the law introduced by the Scottish Government is better than the Bill we are dealing with, but I have heard the Minister’s response and, based on that, I beg to ask leave to withdraw the new clause.

Clause, by leave, withdrawn.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Consideration completed. As the Bill has not been amended since its introduction, Standing Order No. 83L does not apply and I do not need to suspend the House to reconsider the Bill.

I remind the House that on Second Reading the Speaker certified that clauses 1 and 2 and the schedule relate exclusively to England on matters within devolved legislative competence. Under Standing Order No. 83M, a consent motion is therefore required for the Bill to proceed. Copies of the motion are being made available in the Vote Office and on the parliamentary website, and have been made available to Members in the Chamber.

Does the Minister intend to move the consent motion?

David Rutley indicated assent. The House forthwith resolved itself into the Legislative Grand Committee (England) (Standing Order No. 83M(3)).

[ Dame Eleanor Laing in the Chair]

7.59 pm

The First Deputy Chairman of Ways and Means (Dame Eleanor Laing): I remind hon. Members that, if there is a Division, only Members representing constituencies in England may vote. I call the Minister to move the consent motion.

Motion made, and Question proposed.

That the Committee consents to the following certified clauses of, and Schedule to, the Wild Animals in Circuses (No. 2) Bill—

Clauses and Schedules certified under SO No. 83J(1)(h) as relating exclusively to England and being within devolved legislative competence

Clauses 1 and 2 of, and the Schedule to, the Bill (Bill 385).—

(David Rutley.)

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): It is a pleasure to speak very briefly. The SNP is quite happy to support the Bill. As the hon. Member for Shipley (Philip Davies) said in the full House of Commons 30 seconds or so ago, this law has been enacted by the Scottish Parliament and already applies. I am grateful to hear him think that it is more substantial than the proposed legislation we are passing today.

We are currently not in the House of Commons but the English Parliament, the Legislative Grand Committee (England), and only for England because of the consequential disapplication of some of the Bill to Wales by dint of a clause. It has only taken me most of the afternoon to try to read through it to figure out exactly where the different extents apply.

I was keen to make sure I was here in the absence of my hon. Friends the Members for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart) and for Glasgow East (David Linden), who usually make sure that the EVEL—English votes for English laws—stages do not go completely unnoticed in Hansard and by the riveted watching public. One day—perhaps today is the day and the hon. Member for Shipley will speak—Members from England and Wales will participate in the Legislative Grand Committee and justify the colossal waste of time and money that has been spent on establishing the EVEL procedure. We wait, perhaps still unfulfilled, for that day to come.

The First Deputy Chairman: I look around expectantly and discover that nobody wishes to catch my eye.

Question agreed to.

The occupant of the Chair left the Chair to report the decision of the Committee (Standing Order No. 83 M (6)).

The Deputy Speaker resumed the Chair, decision reported.

Third Reading

8.2 pm

David Rutley: I beg to move, That the Bill be now read the Third time.

I am pleased to move the motion for the Third Reading of this short but very important Bill. It is a Bill with a very simple purpose: to ban the outdated practice of using wild animals for performance or exhibition in travelling circuses. The Bill addresses important ethical concerns about the way we use and perceive...
wild animals in the 21st century. This country is rightly proud of its place in the world for the protection and care of animals. Our regard and respect for wild animals, and our sense of their intrinsic value, are now much more important to us than allowing them to be used for entertainment.

The Government’s belief, which I hope is widely shared by many in this House, is that travelling circuses are not the right place to experience or learn about wild animals. Frankly, circuses do not need to use wild animals. Most circuses have been thriving without the use of wild animals for a long time now. The continued use of wild animals in travelling circuses, often performing demeaning routines for our amusement, sends completely the wrong message about the value and respect we should accord them. The Government’s view is that the very notion of inducing wild animals to perform tricks in a circus setting is well past its sell-by date and should now stop.

The Bill fulfils a long-term commitment. I once again pay tribute to those hon. Members on both sides of the House who have sought to take it forward as a private Member’s Bill, including my hon. Friends the Members for Colchester (Will Quince), for Torbay (Kevin Foster) and for Copeland (Trudy Harrison), and my hon. Friend the Member for The Wrekin (Mark Pritchard), who took this important issue forward initially, for his advocacy and support.

I also wish to thank hon. Members who have contributed to today’s debates and throughout the proceedings in this House, as well as the members of the Public Bill Committee and the expert witnesses, including those who submitted written evidence for their consideration on the Bill. I am grateful for the constructive engagement by representatives from animal welfare non-governmental organisations, especially in their willingness to help to draft the guidance that I have committed the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs to producing when the Act comes into force.

I extend my thanks to my hard-working and long-suffering Bill team, my private office, the parliamentary private secretaries, the Whips on both sides and, of course, the Clerks for their work and support on this issue. I thank those on the Opposition Front Bench for the constructive way in which they have taken the Bill forward and most of the other proposed legislation we have been working on over previous weeks.

It is an honour to take the Bill forward. It has had such overwhelming support from all parties, the public and animal welfare organisations from Second Reading through to today. We are committed to enhancing our well-deserved worldwide reputation for caring for animals after we leave the EU. This ban is another important use of wild animals in travelling circuses, often performing. The Bill is well-deserved worldwide reputation for caring for animals. W e are grateful for the continued support of colleagues across the House for our efforts to protect animals and to ensure a sustainable future for our shared planet. I wish the Bill safe and speedy passage through its remaining stages in the other place.

8.6 pm

Sandy Martin (Ipswich) (Lab): I thank all those right hon. and hon. Members whose persistence has led to the Bill coming before us today: in particular, my right hon. Friend the Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn), who as Secretary of State at the time promoted the initial consultation; Thomas Docherty, the previous Member for Dunfermline and West Fife; my hon. Friend the Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick); the hon. Members for Colchester (Will Quince), for Torbay (Kevin Foster) and for Copeland (Trudy Harrison); my hon. Friend the Member for Workington (Sue Hayman); and the right hon. Member for Hemel Hempstead (Sir Mike Penning), who made the very powerful point that it is important for the public perception of the force of law that the police should have at least equal powers to inspectors in the enforcement of the Bill. Of course, we have all been ably assisted by the officers who have prepared the Bill.

There is overwhelming popular support across the country for the Bill, with 94% supporting a total ban on wild animals in circuses in the 2009 consultation. There is almost unanimous cross-party support shown by the hon. Members from across the House, who have not just signalled their support but have pushed over a 10-year period for this Bill to come before us. As a newcomer to this House I do think there is an issue with the length of time it has taken for various contentious Bills to make it into law.

We can be pleased that the Bill has now been taken on by the Government and should indeed make it into law, but there is other outstanding legislation that has still not come before us. In this context, I want to mention the need for an animal cruelty sentencing Bill, the absence of which has been a bone of contention for the last three years, despite the best efforts of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee, the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, other campaigning organisations, various hon. Members and despite the Secretary of State assuring us that the Government would introduce one as quickly as possible.

We have supported the Bill all along and will obviously support it today. We have had assurances from the Minister that there is no added danger of a “last hurrah” of additional wild animals being introduced to circuses in this country in the remaining time between now and January of next year. In this context, it is sensible that the hon. Member for Shipley withdrew his amendment, as the opportunity for a last hurrah would be enormous in the additional two-year period that that amendment would have afforded. I expect many of us have been lobbied, as I have, by Martin Lacey of Circus Krone and invited to visit his circus in Munich. Mr Lacey also took the trouble to travel to this country to make the case for his big cats circus, and I feel sure that he would want to take advantage of a two-year grace period to bring his lions and tigers to perform in this country if he were able to do so.

The Minister also assured us that the definition of travelling circus, and the protection and welfare of any animals that were found to be in contravention of the Bill, would be adequately covered by guidance. We believe that the Minister is perfectly sincere in these assurances, but we still maintain that it would be preferable to have these things acknowledged on the face of the Bill.
We have the Bill before us because it was made clear that the existing Animal Welfare Act could not be used to ban wild animals in circuses. The test for welfare under that Act would not be clear enough to end the practice of transporting animals to perform for the amusement of the public, but there is a higher test: the respect we have for our fellow creatures. The Bill is but one step in showing that respect, but it is an important one.

Visiting animals in their natural habitat and seeing them living the lives that they would naturally want to live is uplifting and educational. Watching them jump or climb on to bits of furniture, or even on to each other, and contort themselves into unnatural postures is neither educational nor respectful. It is well past time that we should end the use of wild animals in circuses and we are pleased to support the Bill.

8.10 pm

Sir Roger Gale (North Thanet) (Con): I could possibly have tested your patience by making an overlong intervention on the Minister, Madam Deputy Speaker, but rather than do that I thought I would make a brief observation now.

I think I am right to say that on Report the Minister said that the Bill had been six and a half years in preparation. In fact, it was in 1997 that, as the then chairman of the all-party animal welfare group, I presented to the incoming Minister of State at the Home Office in Mr Blair’s Government—who, I think I am right in saying, was the now right hon. Member for Knowsley (Mr Howarth)—the group’s report on performing animals in circuses. It is comforting to know that matters in this place move so swiftly and that it has taken only 22 years for these measures to reach the statute book.

The fact is that the persistence of colleagues on both sides of the House of Commons has driven us to where we are today, in the hope and expectation that the Bill will get a fair wind in the House of Lords and become law and that performing animals in circuses will be consigned to the dustbin of history along with very many other animal abuses that we have managed to deal with.

In the spirit of total co-operation and in gratitude to the hon. Member for Ipswich (Sandy Martin), was saying. We have legislation on the statute book but we have to be good and strict on this issue. Dogfighting is on the up in this country. Cockfighting, believe it or not, continues to this day. There is badger-baiting.

Sir Roger Gale: Trophy hunting.

Sir Mike Penning: To me, a trophy-hunting Bill is the simplest thing in the world. If someone wants to do that sort of thing, do not bring trophies—the animal’s head—to this country. That is so abhorrent to 99.9% of the British public.

We have set a line in the sand and shown that we can bring such Bills through the House—it is a shame that more people are not in the Public Gallery to listen to us when we get things right. I am sure that, tomorrow, in Parliament this will get thruppence, because of President Trump and other things that have been going on, but this indicates what this House can do and is right morally and ethically. We should be very proud of what has happened in this House today.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): If I may say so, the right hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. It is a great pity that when something of importance is achieved in the proceedings of this House, as it is about to be, it is not noted because the commentators prefer drama to care and doing the right thing.

Sir Mike Penning: Perhaps they prefer a circus in this House.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Yes, we will not go on about which circus is really the circus. To bring about what everyone in the Chamber has been aiming towards for a very long time, let me put the question.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read the Third time and passed.
Madam Deputy Speaker: For the sake of clarity, I confirm to the House that the Back-Bench motion on the mineworkers’ pension scheme will not be moved today.

Business without Debate

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

Order No. 118(6))

EU EXIT (FINANCIAL SERVICES AND MARKETS)

That the draft Financial Services (Miscellaneous) (Amendment) (EU Exit) (No. 2) Regulations 2019, which were laid before this House on 3 April, be approved.—(Iain Stewart.)

Question agreed to.

PETITION

Walsall Arboretum: park organisation

8.17 pm

Valerie Vaz (Walsall South) (Lab): The petition is from residents of the United Kingdom. The petitioners are concerned that Walsall Metropolitan Borough Council’s decision to restructure the management of Walsall Arboretum in Walsall South was made without consultation with the public. The petitioners say that the changes leave the arboretum with no onsite management and no dedicated management team. The petitioners say that these changes return the management of the arboretum to the situation it was in prior to investment by the Heritage Lottery fund. The petitioners note that there is a related petition on this matter started by my constituent, Fiona Macmillan, on change.org with over 1,395 signatures.

The petition states:

To the House of Commons.

The Petition of Residents of the United Kingdom

Declares that Walsall MBC’s decision to restructure the management of Walsall Arboretum in Walsall South was made without consultation with the public; further that the changes leave the Arboretum with no onsite management and no dedicated management team; further that these changes return the management of the Arboretum to the situation it was in prior to investment by the Heritage Lottery fund; and further notes a related petition on this matter on change.org with over 1,200 signatures.

The petitioners therefore request the House of Commons to urge Walsall MBC to consult the public about the changes and restore the posts of Arboretum Manager and Events Co-ordinator dedicated to ensuring the activities, events, care and maintenance of the Arboretum continue.

8.19 pm

Bim Afolami (Hitchin and Harpenden) (Con): I rise to discuss transport in Hertfordshire. I am an MP for Hitchin and Harpenden—the MP, not an MP; there is only one, at least at the moment. Transport affects us all—not just Hertfordshire, but all counties and everybody in the House—but it particularly affects my constituency, and today I want to draw the House’s and the Minister’s attention to two specific issues: first, the train system and commuters going in and out of London from the stations of both Hitchin and Harpenden—both main commuter stations into London; and secondly, the looming expansion of Luton airport and the constant disruption faced by many of my constituents and others across Hertfordshire, including the constituents of many of my colleagues.

I will start with trains. When thinking about our transport system in Hertfordshire, we must have a sense of balance. Better public transport is essential. I do not know anybody on either side of the House who would disagree. We recognise that people in Hertfordshire want better public transport. Yes, they want better roads as well, as it so happens, but they want better public transport. They also want to maintain their standard of life. They moved, often from big towns or cities, principally London, because they did not want to be there. Hertfordshire is a much more rural county than many people realise, and the green belt is very precious to many of my constituents. It is important to bear that in mind when thinking about what infrastructure improvements are needed.

In particular, on the subject of Luton airport, I spoke to the Minister earlier today. I know how much he understands and cares about these issues, despite being relatively new to his brief. It is important that infrastructure such as airports is used for the benefit of all and is mindful of the negative externalities and impacts on many people in Hertfordshire and in particular my constituency.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): As the hon. Gentleman says, infrastructure and better funding for transport are important not just in his constituency but across the whole UK. Does he agree that decent infrastructure is necessary to every community and that, although issues such as potholes might not be high on the register for some, for those of us who want investment in our local communities, good infrastructure is the starting point, and that requires good planning and good funding, and these two must go hand in hand?

Bim Afolami: I agree with the hon. Gentleman. Good infrastructure matters. It is the difference between being a developed advanced country and not being one. The ability to get into work in a timely manner is critical to the economic and social wellbeing of a country, particularly in constituencies such as mine that rely on commuting. He talks about potholes and roads. I will come to this later. Roads are the essential lifeblood of pretty much every small business, of people taking their kids to school, visiting family, seeing friends or just conducting everyday business. These things may appear small, but they are critical.
That leads me to trains. Many in the House will have heard me talk many times about trains. I can see my hon. Friend the Member for Wells (James Heappey) in his place. He has heard me bang on about this many times.

James Heappey (Wells) (Con): I never tire of it.

Bim Afolami: Hitchin station in north Hertfordshire serves 3.2 million passengers a year—1.3 million more than nearby Letchworth. Everybody in the House will be aware of the debacle in the rail industry in May last year with the big timetable changes, which did not go well. Like many others, Hitchin suffered severely, although there were some improvements. People going from Hitchin into central London no longer have to change at King’s Cross St Pancras but can run all the way through the core of London to the south of London, which many constituents have told me is a significant improvement that has considerably improved their commute. That should be noted and welcomed.

That said, there are significant problems with the timetabling, particularly with overcrowding. This is a big problem, and not just because it is uncomfortable; it can often be a health problem, especially in the summer—and we are getting into warmer weather now. For anybody who has a disability or is pregnant or feeling ill, it can be a significant problem when commuting to and from work. The overcrowding is basically due to the fact that since the timetable changes there are fewer peak time trains from Hitchin and the trains stop more often going into London. This increases the overcrowding.

The Minister or any of the millions of people watching might think me just another MP whingeing about his local train service, because that is what local MPs do, and that is partly true, but unless the things that local MPs bring to this House, often after being begged by constituents, get heard, and unless constituents can see they are being heard and that their concerns are being acted on, there will be a crisis of trust not just in the local MP, but in the Government and Parliament as a whole, as a means to resolve the issues that people face. On these sorts of issues, I urge people—I know that the Member, being a very good champion of his own constituency, understands and cares about this—to think about these things very deeply. Constituents email or write to their MPs, but they have better things to do; they do it because it matters and significantly impacts on their lives.

The Department for Transport does not run all the trains. It is not in charge of every driver of every route. The Transport Secretary does not determine every train timetable in and out of Hitchin or anywhere else. The Department sits atop a structure that includes Network Rail, which is responsible for the infrastructure and stations, principally, and for timetabling, and the operators—in our case, GTR—which are responsible for running services under franchise agreements with the Department. My contention is that GTR has not treated Hitchin as a major station. It has treated it as just another station in north Hertfordshire and not adequately appreciated the fact that it is the main station in that area, and this has had real consequences.

To best illustrate these consequences, rather than use my own words—we have heard enough of those already—I thought I would gather up some emails that I have received in only the last 72 hours about the train service from Hitchin. Constituent 1 told me—I will not name them because then they might appear on Google and it would all be terribly embarrassing, but I will quote them directly:

“I am still to gain an answer from GTR as to why the station of Letchworth has seen such vast improvements in service over the past 12 months whilst the Hitchin service remains relatively unimproved. Letchworth now has the same frequency of peak trains as Hitchin (despite the fact that Hitchin has almost double the annual usage) as well as gaining Direct services”

—to London—

“(which Hitchin commuters had previously lost). As a committed campaigning for a greener future you can see no logic in the fact I can now drive to Letchworth station rather than walk to nearby Hitchin, and still get to London faster!”

Here is another example, from Mandy.

“Please can you explain to me why every time there is a school holiday”

GTR “are totally unable to run anything approaching an acceptable service?”

Chris writes:

“Hello Bim...Can I ask what can and will be done? The service provided...is abysmal and must be a serious consideration when people of our age are looking to relocate out of London. It must also affect the prosperity of the area as so many of us commute. The costs are enormous yet the service is poor at best.”

Mike says:

“Hi Bim,

The trains are worse than ever, it's been a complete disgrace since the May timetable changes. Most seem to be around lack of stuff? I don't understand...are you able to find out if they're lying to us? I just want to be able to get to work in the morning and home in the evening.”

I will not continue, but I have received those emails over the last 72 hours, and I have received hundreds more over the last 12 months. This is a real problem with which I believe GTR has manifestly failed to deal. What do we need? The answer is simple. In Hitchin, we need more peak-time trains leaving between 07:30 and 08:30, and more peak-time trains arriving between 18:00 and 18:45. I ask the Minister to deal with that specifically in his response.

Let me now turn to Harpenden, the equally loved station in my constituency. GTR has been pretty unwilling to accept that any changes are necessary, but in the case of Harpenden it has openly admitted that its actions last May caused severe difficulty. It has been quite candid about that, and has engaged with me several times on the subject of the station and the trains. That culminated in a meeting that I arranged in February this year with representatives from St Albans, Luton, Bedford and, obviously, Harpenden: commuter groups, local MPs, officials from GTR, and various people who decided to turn up. That was a big room.

The stated aim of the meeting was to deal with the problem at Harpenden, because everyone in the room recognised that there was a problem. Honest, open views were exchanged, and by the end of the meeting everyone had agreed that Harpenden needed at least two more peak-time services that would otherwise stop at Luton, because the number of commuters between Luton and London was infinitesimal compared with the number at Harpenden. That was agreed by everyone in the room—except the hon. Member for Luton South (Mr Shuker). The hon. Gentleman is not here and
cannot defend himself, and I do not blame him for what he said. He felt that the issue affected his station, he did not want to be on record as having accepted that any station in his constituency had “lost” services to Harpenden, and he objected.

GTR manifestly failed in its duties. It is no way to run a process to accept that there is a problem—everyone is in a room with all the passenger loading data, the information and the evidence, and everyone agrees that in Harpenden services are needed from Luton rather than Bedford or St Albans—and then to hide behind an effective veto from a local MP. I do not believe that that is the way to run a service.

This afternoon I spoke separately to the Minister and to the rail Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough (Andrew Jones). Will the Minister commit himself, on behalf of the Department, to meeting me, various officials from the Department—if he wishes—and local commuter groups, along with GTR, to establish, finally, how we can broker some sort of agreement or solution to the problems faced at both Hitchin and Harpenden? That would be welcomed not just by me but, most important, by my constituents. Then, finally, we might achieve a resolution and an endgame to the problems that we face.

A connected, although separate, issue is the long-proposed rail freight site at the Radlett aerodrome, on the same line, which may not be advantageous to commuting services. Will the Minister confirm that the Government are no longer seeking to include that in their rail freight plans for the south-east?

I have dealt with the issue of trains. Let me now turn to the issue of Luton airport, which, surprisingly enough, is in Luton. It is in Bedfordshire, which is right next to Harpenden services are needed from Luton rather than Bedford or St Albans—and then to hide behind an effective veto from a local MP. I do not believe that that is the way to run a service.

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I have dealt with the issue of trains. Let me now turn to the issue of Luton airport, which, surprisingly enough, is in Luton. It is in Bedfordshire, which is right next to my constituency. Constituents of mine live less than 200 yards from the runway. It is a rapidly growing airport: it handles more than 16.6 million passengers a year; and passenger numbers over the last 10 years have grown by over 80%.

If the House will indulge me, I will explain why I am particularly concerned about Luton airport beyond the fact that the disruption to my constituents from both noise and air pollution has grown significantly. Luton airport is owned by London Luton Airport Ltd on behalf of Luton Borough Council, which is also the planning authority hitherto responsible for approving increases in the allowed numbers of passengers. In December 2013, Luton Borough Council approved a proposal to expand Luton airport—a huge expansion, going up to 38 million passengers, which was later reduced to 32 million. I think, however, that everybody can appreciate that that is a significant increase from the current limit of 18 million passengers.

I am completely opposed to this proposal for expansion of Luton airport, but that is a subject for another day, because the processes of how it will be submitted are still being gone through and the Government have already accepted that the increase is so great that the application will go to the Planning Inspectorate at central Government rather than be decided by Luton Borough Council. I would make this point about Luton airport: it is not the right place for a major airport the size of Gatwick. Its location on a plateau means that topographically it is closed by fog and bad weather much more frequently than most airports in the south-east. The dense pattern of settlements around Hertfordshire and that part of the country—whether Hemel Hempstead, Harpenden, St Albans or large villages—means that significant numbers of towns and villages face growing amounts of noise and air pollution and traffic on rural roads, and particularly in my constituency.

Returning to Luton Borough Council’s role, to be frank, my constituents—and, I know, many constituents in Hertfordshire generally who are overlooked by planes from Luton airport—do not trust the council on this issue, because there is a conflict of interests: Luton Borough Council owns Luton airport. I want to be very clear that I am not alleging any specific illegality or impropriety—I have no evidence of that—but, as all of us here know because we are politicians, the appearance of fairness is often as important as fairness itself and there is a significant trust deficit between my constituents, many people in Hertfordshire and Luton Borough Council and its role vis-à-vis the airport.

In December 2013, Luton Borough Council approved a proposed expansion of 9 million—from a limit of 9 million passengers to 18 million passengers. That proposal was in 2013, so only six years ago, but it was meant to take place over a 15-year period up until 2028, and the project was designed to be a balanced one that matched growth with mitigation measures for traffic, air pollution, noise pollution and the like. On the face of it that seems a broadly acceptable way of proceeding, or at least it seemed so at the time.

Since then I am afraid we have seen a lot of growth; in fact, as I have said, we are already getting up to the limit of 18 million passengers in 2019, despite the fact that we are only meant to get to that point by 2028. There has been lots of growth but no mitigation. In fact it has been worse than no mitigation; things have got worse—things have been going backwards. Noise for my constituents, which blights them every single day—and night, as I will come on to—is getting worse and worse and worse for those who are unlucky enough to live beneath a flight path.

Luton airport is now in breach of a key noise control planning condition known as the night noise contour. Broadly speaking, limits were set on how much night noise there should be and Luton airport has exceeded that limit. Here I come to the problem with Luton Borough Council: guess which body will be making the decision on whether Luton airport will be able to breach its agreed planning condition, which was expressly designed to limit noise that affects Hertfordshire? That body is Luton Borough Council.

People might think that, just because the council owns the airport, it would not necessarily approve any expansion, and that is of course true. I am sure that it will say that there are strict Chinese walls in its organisation, and perhaps there are. However, Luton Borough Council receives more than £20 million from Luton airport from dividends alone, and we can see the direct incentive to make the airport grow as fast as possible so that Luton gets the gain from the growth. I accept that there is significant economic gain for Luton; I do not deny that. However, the pain—in terms of increased traffic on small rural roads, increased noise and air pollution and significant disturbance—will come to my constituents and the people of Hertfordshire. Luton gets the gain and Hertfordshire gets the pain.
Does the Minister agree that planning conditions governing aviation noise and emissions are a key part of maintaining the balance between growth and environmental protection to which the Government’s aviation policy framework aspires? Does he condone the failure of Luton Borough Council to enforce a key planning condition despite the fact that the airport has breached the condition for the past two years and that a further breach of the same condition is predicted for this year? Will he, on behalf of his colleague, the aviation Minister in the other place, agree to the aviation Minister or another Minister from the Department sitting down with me and other local representatives and campaign groups from Hertfordshire to discuss whether the decision should be called in, in the light of the breach of the noise planning contour at Luton airport, such is the disturbance that this is imposing on my constituents?

We spoke about roads and potholes at the beginning of the debate, and I want to put on record that Hertfordshire County Council is doing its level best to improve the state of its roads. It has done well, and I call out Councillor David Williams, the leader of the county council, for working hard on this and making it a focus, but the council needs more money. I urge the Minister and the Department to keep in mind that we are not there yet. The money has increased, but there needs to be significantly more to improve the state of our rural roads in Hertfordshire and across the country.

On the roads we have cars, and we also have buses. Buses are the lifeblood of rural areas for elderly people or those who cannot afford a car. They cannot get anywhere without an adequate bus service, but in many parts of my constituency the local bus services have worsened and are inadequate. The village of Redbourn is an example, and I call out Councillor Victoria Mead for her absolutely fantastic campaigning to improve the bus service from Redbourn. Various villages to the south of Hitchin also have failing bus services that need support and improvement, and I urge the Minister to take a look at this issue in rural areas. How can we help our local bus services? I will work with him on anything that he and the Department wish to do.

I am a realist; I know that there is no magic wand. These issues are structural—whether they involve trains or Luton airport—and they take time. They are complex and difficult, and as I have said, the Government are not the only actor involved. However, I am asking the Government—in addition to answering the precise questions that I have mentioned—to lean in a bit more heavily on the side of the people and against the interests of GTR, which is not taking my constituents’ concerns adequately into account, and against the unbridled, unfettered growth of Luton airport by Luton Borough Council. I have had meetings with the airport’s operators—the previous ones and the current ones—and they say, “We don’t have radio beacons anymore. We’ve got GPS tracking,” and I say, “I hate to say this, gentlemen, but you are the important managers who run this airport. I was standing in the village of Caddington, which is just about in my constituency, and I could have shook hands with the pilot of the plane that flew over. You are telling me that that plane wasn’t there and that it was another 500 yards away.” The residents say to me, “Look, Mike, this is what we have to put up with.”

The airport has been there a long time—it was an RAF airfield during the second world war—but there has been an increase in flights, particularly at night, with low take-offs. I have talked to pilots, many of whom work at Luton airport and live in my constituency or that of my hon. Friend, and have said to them in private, “Come on. Why don’t the planes climb faster when they come off the plateau?” If they climbed faster, the lives of my constituents and my hon. Friend’s would not be blighted so much. The answer, I am afraid, is money. The faster the planes climb, the more fuel they burn. The simple fact is that the operators, particularly the low-cost airlines, are trying to make as much money as they can, and does Luton Borough Council give a monkey’s about our constituents? No, it does not, because it is raking in the money. That is where the problem lies. I am pleased that some of the planning will now be called in and that the Planning Inspectorate will look at it, but it has taken nearly 10 years to get to this situation, and the legal authority for Luton airport is Luton Borough Council.

I will not repeat everything that my hon. Friend said about the airport, but am I a hypocrite—have I flown from Luton airport? Yes, I have on occasion. It is very convenient for my constituents, some of whom work there, so the economic gain is obvious, but we have to balance that against my constituents’ quality of life. If I stand in some of the villages in the rural parts of my constituency, I can smell something that smells like paraffin, and it is aviation fuel. They tell me that they put bits and bobs out there in the woods, but there is no mitigation out there at all, particularly when it comes to noise, yet that was part of the original plan.

I am so pleased that we have some time to talk about more areas of concern in my constituency, which shares many of the issues that affect my hon. Friend’s constituency. Turning to rail, his constituency is served by Thameslink and the east coast main line, but I am on the other side, so I have the west coast main line, and we have a fairly new operator in West Midlands Railway. Until a couple of weeks ago, I just got complaints from people saying, “I couldn’t get a seat. It is not fair,” and I feel for them, because they pay the same money as someone who
[Sir Mike Penning]

has a seat. If someone gets on at Berkhamsted, they can get a seat, but someone getting on at Hemel does not get one.

However, I also have two other stations, Apsley and Kings Langley, that are commuter stations for London. Over the past couple of weeks, I have been inundated with letters and emails from constituents saying, “All of a sudden, while I’m waiting at Euston to get the train home, they’ve decided that the train will no longer stop at Apsley, and Hemel will be the first stop, or the train will stop at Watford, but then doesn’t stop until Milton Keynes.” These are people who commute every day and pay a huge amount of money for season tickets. Their cars are often at those stations because they live in more rural parts, so they are trapped. I have written to the rail operator, so it will not be surprised that I am standing here and saying this: it is simply not fair.

The best thing my hon. Friend said to the Minister is that the Government need to lean in on this. The Government represent the British public, and they give out the franchises. This is a relatively new franchise. I had problems with overcrowding under the previous operator, and we had comments about late trains, but now the trains are not even stopping at the stations where they are supposed to stop.

This morning, my member of staff said that the train turned up with six carriages, not eight, so nobody got a seat from Hemel onwards, even though the train stopped. These passengers pay the same money for the service. My Government have given the franchise to an operator that, to me, is in breach of it. Yes, passengers can get compensation, but they do not want that. They just want to go to work. They want to come home on time to see their little ’uns go to bed, and do all the sorts of things that families want to do—they might even want to go to the pub and have a drink on the way home. They are paying for a service, and it is simply not happening.

I have two issues for the Minister, and I completely agree about Luton. It is not just the east coast main line and Thameslink; it is on our side, too.

I drove down this morning on the M1, which is often the lifeblood of commuters in our constituencies because many of them do not have the confidence to use the railway. The bus service is basically full, even from Hemel. For various different reasons, people need to drive. As I drove on to the M1 at junction 8, I might as well have been driving through a rubbish tip. I do not know what Highways England is doing, but it has a responsibility—and I know the public should not throw litter out of their windows. My local authority is desperate to encourage businesses, new people and new companies to come to Hemel. Even the downgraded M10, which is now the A414 and which Highways England still has responsibility for maintaining and looking after, is strewn with litter as it comes into my constituency. The next thing we know, Highways England comes to cut the grass and all the litter gets chopped up.

That sounds trivial, but Hertfordshire is a beautiful county. I have a new town. I have 45,000 homes in my constituency, of which only about 7,000 are in my county. I have a new town. I have 45,000 homes in my constituency, of which only about 7,000 are in my county. I have 45,000 homes in my constituency, of which only about 7,000 are in my county. I have written to the rail operator, so it will not be surprised that I am standing here and saying this: it is simply not fair.

The success of the town means that we are growing. Of my biggest bugbears is that if you drive round, the M25 or down the M1, you will see signs 20 or 30 miles away for Watford. But Watford is not the largest town in Hertfordshire. Hemel Hempstead is. You have to almost bump into Hemel before you see a road sign for it. There is a fixation in our part of the world with Watford. My hon. Friend the Member for Hitchin and Harpenden and I have argued and campaigned on a new hospital for our constituents, but the news today is that they are going to chuck £350 million into the centre of Watford and the Victorian hospital there.

The Highways Agency shares the fixation. You have to be at the junction with the A41 before you see a signpost saying “Hemel Hempstead”, even though we are the largest town in Hertfordshire. I cannot allow us to continue to be the forgotten town in Hertfordshire. We are the largest, the fastest growing and, at the moment, the most dynamic town, partly because of the terrible explosions that happened in 2005. Most of my town was damaged by the Buncefield explosions, and my council has been dynamic in rebuilding my town and bringing new businesses in. That brings me back to the point that both my hon. Friend the Member for

of Government not doing their job. I am sure Highways England will say it has a programme and that it collects the litter every month or two, and I have written to it loads of times over the years, but it has to be named and shamed. It is an absolute mess.

It is not just litter. Street furniture was dumped at junction 8 when Highways England did some kind of maintenance years and years ago. I have written to Highways England over and again, and I am sure it thinks it can just ignore a Member of Parliament. Well, in this case it cannot because I am naming and shaming it from the Floor of the House.

It is not all doom and gloom. In Hemel Hempstead we have the lowest unemployment since the new town was built. The unemployment rate is about 1.5%, which means there are more jobs in my town than there are unemployed people available to take them. That means there is a lot of commuting into Hemel.

Junction 8 was redesigned in about 2005, and we were thrilled when it happened, but I have 5,000 houses being built around the junction—the land is owned by the Crown Estate—and I have 20,000 new homes coming over the next 20 years. Interestingly, my constituency contained Redbourn many years ago but, as we have grown, Redbourn has committed to another constituency.

We are growing and people are coming into the town, and junction 8 cannot cope. I know there are draft plans on the statute book, as I was a Roads Minister many years ago. Roads Ministers have plans for future road improvements and roadworks put in front of them by their people, and they consider things such as the business case ratio—if we spend £1 million on that, will we get back £5 million or £6 million? Plans are often rejected because the BCR is low. I also know full well that every now and again the Treasury will say, “Hold on a second, we’ve got quite a lot of money. Tell us about projects that are on the stocks.” One project that needs to be on the stocks—and I understand it is being worked on at the moment—is a junction 8 improvement scheme. It is now getting dangerous, because traffic is backing up at the traffic lights as we come into Hemel on to the M1 slip—and what was the M10 slip. That is unacceptable.

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Hitchin and Harpenden and the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) made about infrastructure. The public have to have trust in us to deliver the infrastructure so that business can prosper and improve the quality of life in my constituency and Hertfordshire.

We have an interesting problem. Both the east coast main line and the west coast main line have major problems at the moment, with two separate and completely different franchises. Luton airport blights my constituency and the quality of life in my constituency and Hertfordshire.

The public have to have trust in us to deliver the infrastructure. The public have to have trust in the Minister: it is the Minister standing at the Dispatch Box in 2010, in an Adjournment debate that should have lasted 15 minutes and was an hour and a half. The reason this matters is that people want to have trust in this place—we were talking about that in the previous debate. People want to know that their emails from Mary, John, Peter or whoever—are heard, and it is not just a letter to the different rail operators or to the Minister: it is the Minister standing at the Dispatch Box and saying that he or she will do something about it. That is what we would expect.

8.58 pm

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Michael Ellis): As both my hon. Friend the Member for Hitchin and Harpenden (Bim Afolami) and my right hon. Friend the Member for Hemel Hempstead (Sir Mike Penning) know, Her Majesty’s Government—this Government—are always on the side of the people, and that of course includes very much the people of Hertfordshire. This is my first appearance at the Dispatch Box as Minister of State for Transport, and I am privileged to respond to the excellent points that they have made.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Hitchin and Harpenden on securing the debate. He is an avid representative of his constituents’ interests: he was when I was Minister in the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, and I know that he is on transport, too. I welcome the opportunity to speak about Hertfordshire, which is a sizeable county with a number of thriving communities, as my hon. Friend and my right hon. Friend have said. Transport is a key factor in ensuring that those communities can work together to secure the local ambitions of a vibrant place to live and work. We heard my right hon. Friend the Member for Hemel Hempstead talk about how incredibly low—record-breakingly low—unemployment is in his constituency. Of course, transport is a key factor in how communities live, work and play, and in how they secure their ambitions.

My hon. Friend and right hon. Friend were wide-ranging in their discussions of modes of transport. I wish to make reference to some of the work that we are doing at the Department for Transport and how we are investing in transport in the county of Hertfordshire. If I may, I shall start by talking about the A120. I am sure my hon. Friend the Member for Hitchin and Harpenden is aware that we recently announced our support for a significant transport scheme in Hertfordshire. The A120 Little Hadham bypass, promoted by Hertfordshire County Council, consists of a 3.9 km single-carriageway bypass to the north of the village of Little Hadham. The A120 is an important east-west link in Hertfordshire’s primary road network, running eastwards from the A10 at Puckeridge to join the M11 near Stansted airport.

The scheme is designed to remove the significant congestion and delays that are caused by the one-way working, the signal-controlled junction and the bridge in the centre of the village, as well as to reduce the risk of fluvial flooding in Little Hadham. The total cost of that scheme alone is £39.58 million; via the Department for Transport and the Environment Agency, the Government are providing £30.6 million of that sum.

I shall come to aviation in due course, but let me move on first to local roads. The local highway network is of course one of our most valuable national assets and an essential component of our economy. It is the local roads, not the A roads or the motorways, that form some 98% of our national highway network, and local authorities such as Hertfordshire County Council have an existing legal duty to maintain them. Having a good and well-maintained local highway network has never been more important, and that applies to all the counties of our country. The Government and businesses see good roads, both strategic and local, as vital to commercial success. That of course includes issues such as litter as well as the roads’ structural goodness, if I can put it that way.

It is hugely important to have roads in an acceptable and safe condition, and that is true for us all, whether we are car users, lorry drivers, bus passengers, cyclists or pedestrians. Let us face it: most of us are many of those things at various times. Ministers and Members of Parliament receive plenty of correspondence on potholes, for example. I myself have considerable experience in this policy area: I campaigned on the subject as a Back Bencher and was credited by the former Chancellor of the Exchequer George Osborne with drawing attention to the issue as it related to Northamptonshire.

The Government are investing more than £6 billion in funding for local highway authorities in England outside London between 2015 and 2021. Indeed, this year alone, the county of Hertfordshire is receiving more than £14 million for local highway maintenance. That funding is not ring-fenced and its use is entirely at the discretion of highway authorities based on their local needs and priorities. I assure my hon. Friend that we will continue to work with local highway authorities on a wide range of initiatives, including ensuring that funding is used for its intended purpose—to improve the condition of our local road network—as well as ensuring that authorities are open and transparent about how the significant funding we are providing is being used, because it is a lot of money.

We are also looking at transport improvements on the strategic road network. The first road investment strategy has one scheme in Hertfordshire—the smart motorway between A1(M) junctions 6 to 8. It is scheduled to start construction this financial year, 2019-20, and it will be “all lane running”, with the hard shoulder converted into a permanent running lane to help reduce congestion. Variable speed limits will also be implemented to smooth traffic flow.
As well as that, £3.5 billion has been allocated for the major road network and the large local major schemes programme. We are working with subnational transport bodies, including England’s Economic Heartland, of which Hertfordshire is a member, to prioritise schemes in their areas to be put forward for funding consideration. A lot of money is going into roads in these areas.

Rail also plays a crucial role in the Hertfordshire economy and transport network. We know that more than 60,000 people commute out of the county by rail every day, with the majority commuting to London. Rail also brings more than 12,000 workers into Hertfordshire, so many are commuting into the county as well as out of it. A number of rail projects are therefore being committed or planned that will transform rail travel in the region over the next 10 to 15 years. I understand that my hon. Friend had a positive meeting with the rail Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough (Andrew Jones), earlier today, and I understand that a further meeting has been scheduled to discuss rail services in Hitchin and Harpenden in more detail.

Major projects will provide significant changes to the capacity available and journey opportunities on key services to and from Hertfordshire. We are planning and delivering investment in key local stations in Hertfordshire, such as the planned second footbridge at St Albans City station and the Stevenage Turnback project.

Govia Thameslink Railway provides most of the services in Hertfordshire. I will focus on that franchise not only for that reason but because it was mentioned by my hon. Friend. GTR runs Thameslink and Great Northern services, which connect Harpenden, St Albans, Hitchin, Stevenage, Welwyn Garden City, Hertford and other Hertfordshire towns to London. Recent overall performance on GTR—I have asked about this—has been strong. Its overall public performance measure figure for the most recent rail period—covering May—was 88%. However, I accept that there have been some major operational incidents in recent weeks, including power and signal failures, which have negatively impacted performance across the GTR network, including at Hitchin and Harpenden stations. My Department continues to monitor performance to ensure that, when these incidents occur, the operator recovers service as quickly as possible.

I was concerned to hear my hon. Friend mention the fact that several of his constituents had written to say that they had not received replies from GTR. Perhaps he will raise these points with me afterwards, or write to me in more detail, and I will see whether we can assist in getting expeditious responses.

In the timetable change last month, GTR introduced an additional train each hour in both directions on the Cambridge to Brighton route. I am advised that Hitchin now has more services in each peak, including more fast services, compared with before the May timetable change last year. Hitchin passengers now have a much wider range of possible destinations, with the option of travelling to King’s Cross or using the Thameslink services for direct access to St Pancras, Farringdon, City Thameslink and Blackfriars. Since last month, this range of destinations has also been available at weekends—which it was not previously—with a direct service each hour now running through central London to Brighton on Saturdays or Gatwick on Sundays.

As my hon. Friend says, GTR undertook a passenger demand review on the Thameslink route between St Pancras, St Albans, Luton and Bedford during the morning and evening peak periods to determine properly the usage of each service, including the newly introduced Thameslink express services, following timetable changes throughout the route in May 2018. GTR has consulted on small-scale changes with stakeholders who represent the interests of passengers on the Harpenden route. While an agreement was not able to be reached in time to allow for these changes from May 2019, GTR has said that this process is ongoing and that it will continue discussions with all affected parties to try to achieve a settlement for future timetable changes.

Once the midland main line upgrade works are completed, the frequency, seat numbers and overall capacity at Harpenden, Fletwick and Leagrave stations will be increased to the level that was originally planned. We have already seen additional weekend services at Harpenden, with two extra trains each hour on Saturdays and Sundays introduced in the timetable change last month. For the first time in 40 years, passengers from Hertfordshire are riding on new trains to London Moorgate, as GTR begins to replace mainland Britain’s oldest electric rail fleet. In addition to the new class 700 trains that have been introduced on Thameslink services, 150 new carriages are being introduced on Great Northern in a £240 million investment to replace trains that first entered service as long ago as 1976. The new trains have capacity for 940 people, providing around 25% more capacity compared with the trains they replace. They have air conditioning and free wi-fi, and are designed to modern standards for safety and accessibility. Those are all positive aspects.

As my hon. Friend will know, the Chancellor of the Exchequer announced an extra £500 million at the autumn Budget 2018 for the housing infrastructure fund, bringing the total funding available to £5.5 billion to unlock up to 650,000 new homes across England. The fund will: deliver new physical infrastructure to support new and existing communities; make more land available for housing in high-demand areas, resulting in additional homes that otherwise would not have been built; and support ambitious local authorities that want to step up their plans for growth and make a meaningful difference to overall housing supply.

In March 2018, the Government announced the areas that are being taken forward through co-development, where the Government are working with local authorities to further develop their proposals for the housing infrastructure fund. Hertfordshire is one of the places we are working with in co-development. The Department for Transport continues to work closely with other Government Departments and local partners to take forward these proposals. By working together, we can maximise the opportunities that the fund creates. We can create well-connected places with good transport infrastructure, and accelerate the delivery of homes that the county and the country need.

My hon. Friend raised the issue of Luton airport—powerfully so—and the impact of expansion plans on the residents of his constituency. [Interruption.] Indeed, my right hon. Friend the Member for Hemel Hempstead...
eloquently did the same. Under section 23 of the Planning Act 2008, all airport expansion decisions that are seeking to increase their planning cap by over 10 million passengers per year are, as my right hon. Friend acknowledges, going to be required to follow the development consent order process, so they would be considered as nationally significant infrastructure projects. That means that they are subject to Government approval as part of that process. It is not just left to the local authorities.

The Government are aware that Luton airport has been in breach of night noise contour limit planning conditions for the past two years. As the noise controls at Luton airport are set by the local planning authority, decisions on enforcement should also be made at this level and without Government intervention. As Luton airport has requested a variation to a condition of its existing planning permission, which was granted under the Town and Country Planning Act 1990, the question of whether to call the application in is not determined by the aviation Minister. I understand that the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government is considering requests to call in this planning application for a variation of conditions. He will have regard to call-in policy when reaching his decision. In the meantime, it would not be appropriate to comment any further.

The Government recognise, however, that aviation noise is a key concern for communities who live near airports and underneath flight paths, and that aviation emissions are a key factor when considering how the sector can grow sustainably. To maintain an appropriate balance between growth and the environmental impact of aviation, the Government believe that, where possible, noise and environmental controls should be set locally, and this is often achieved through planning conditions.

Sir Mike Penning: There is something special about Luton. Yes, this should usually be done through the local authorities and local councillors should decide, but Luton owns the airport and Luton is the planning authority. It is not done in the usual way; it is a very different situation. They get all the profits and none of the flights; they get all the benefit and we get all the pain.

Michael Ellis: I take on board my right hon. Friend’s point. I am sure he will agree, having said that, that considerable investment is currently being made in transport improvements in Hertfordshire. There are also some excellent opportunities for further investment in this key corridor through the various funding streams that I referred to earlier, most notably the housing infrastructure fund and the major road network. I would urge local partners to build a robust and compelling case that demonstrates to Government the need for investment in key infrastructure in this high-growth part of the country, delivering benefits to the constituents of my right hon. Friend and my hon. Friend, and to current users, as well as equipping the area for future growth and success.

Question put and agreed to.

9.18 pm

House adjourned.
Oral Answers to Questions

CABINET OFFICE

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Minister for the Cabinet Office was asked—

Electoral Integrity Consultation

1. Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): When he plans to launch the consultation on electoral integrity announced on 5 May 2019.

2. Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): What estimate he has made of the number of non-UK EU citizens living in the UK who were unable to register to vote in the European parliamentary elections.

3. Vicky Foxcroft (Lewisham, Deptford) (Lab): What estimate he has made of the number of non-UK EU citizens living in the UK who were unable to register to vote in the European parliamentary elections.

4. Bambos Charalambous (Enfield, Southgate) (Lab): What estimate he has made of the number of non-UK EU citizens living in the UK who were unable to register to vote in the European parliamentary elections.

Ruth Cadbury: Earlier this year, my constituents were bombarded with Facebook adverts telling them that I was stealing Brexit and ignoring their votes. It has been reported that behind those adverts was hundreds of thousands of pounds of dark money. Does the Minister agree that it is vital that voters know who is funding political adverts on social media?

Kevin Foster: We are clear that the consultation needs to look at a wide range of issues, including the potential for shell companies or organisations to be used to funnel money into media campaigns. As I said in my initial answer, we are keen to get this right and to secure cross-party co-operation, so that we can have a robust system in law, because we know that any loopholes left in a rushed piece of legislation would be exploited.

Mr Ranil Jayawardena (North East Hampshire) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that part of having integrity in the system is ensuring that it is easy for people to understand? Electoral systems are critical to that, so will he bring forward plans to introduce first past the post in all English elections?

Kevin Foster: I thank my hon. Friend for his question. He is a great advocate of the first-past-the-post system, which has served this country well for many generations, producing stable government. Any changes to introduce first past the post in other elections would have to compete for legislative time with other priorities.

Christian Matheson (City of Chester) (Lab): Since we publicly raised concerns just over a year ago, the Conservative party has accepted more than £1 million from donors with links to Russia, including the wife of Vladimir Putin’s former deputy Finance Minister, who has donated £112,500 to the Conservative party in the past three months alone, making a total of up to £626,000. Will the review that the Minister is undertaking look at links between the Conservative party and the biggest kleptocrat of all, President Putin?

Kevin Foster: The person referred to is actually a British citizen, but I am not going to take lectures on our intelligence service, he would rather believe Mr Putin’s.

Electoral Registration: Non-UK EU Citizens

6. Vicky Foxcroft (Lewisham, Deptford) (Lab): What estimate he has made of the number of non-UK EU citizens living in the UK who were unable to register to vote in the European parliamentary elections.

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Kevin Foster): The Cabinet Office does not collect or hold information on the number of eligible electors who do not register to vote in any election. The process for EU nationals to register and declare their intention to vote in the UK for these elections was similar to the system used in previous European parliamentary elections.
**Rachael Maskell:** Many of my constituents were denied a vote in the EU elections. Following yesterday’s urgent question, it is clear that the Government failed to implement the recommendations of the 2014 Electoral Commission review, failed to follow EU law, failed to try to extend the deadline for submitting the UC1 form and failed to uphold the human rights of EU residents in the UK. Was that simply Government incompetence, or did they deliberately deny EU citizens the right to vote?

**Kevin Foster:** I am very clear that the Government followed our legal obligations, and on 5 April the Electoral Commission published guidance for electoral registration officers, reminding them to prepare and issue UC1 forms to EU citizens on the register. Again, I reject this; and, again, the system was similar to what we have had in previous European Union elections.

**Vicky Foxcroft:** On 23 May, my constituents Joanna Pardoe, Luís Huesca Molina, Paloma Luna, Peter Tait, Pierro Izzolino, Cristina Bottigella, Sophie Beswick, Yázmin Rivero and dozens more were denied a vote in the EU elections. Yesterday, the Minister failed to apologise to them and the hundreds of other EU citizens who were unable to exercise their democratic right because of the impossible timetable set for Lewisham electoral services by this Government. Will he apologise today?

**Kevin Foster:** I am afraid the timetable is exactly the same legal timetable that has been for previous European parliamentary elections and, ultimately, ensuring compliance with it is the job of the local ERO.

**Bambos Charalambous:** Two campaign groups, the 3 million and British in Europe, have raised more than £40 million to fund a legal challenge to the parliamentary election process. What assessment have the Government made of whether they took the necessary steps at the European elections to uphold article 3 of the European convention on human rights, which protects our right to vote?

**Kevin Foster:** As said previously, the Government complied with all legal obligations and followed an almost identical process to what happened for previous European parliamentary elections. The requirement to make this declaration is part of European law, and we have to share such declarations before polling day. Again, while people may not like the outcome of those elections, I suggest they are better engaging with what voters said than trying to argue the process.

**Mike Wood** (Dudley South) (Con): Will the Minister confirm that the UC1 form is not some arbitrary requirement, as has been suggested, but a core requirement of European law that is required of all European member states and has not been changed since previous elections?

**Kevin Foster:** I thank my hon. Friend for his question. He is right to say that this is a requirement that applied in 2009 and 2014, and there is a requirement under European law for us to have a declaration supplied to other members. Yesterday, the Minister failed to apologise to them and the hundreds of other EU citizens who were unable to exercise their democratic right because of the impossible timetable set for Lewisham electoral services by this Government. Will he apologise today?

**Kevin Foster:** I am afraid the timetable is exactly the same legal timetable there has been for previous European parliamentary elections and, ultimately, ensuring compliance with it is the job of the local ERO.

**Cat Smith** (Lancaster and Fleetwood) (Lab): On this matter, the Minister appears to be taking his cue from Shaggy, protesting, “It Wasn’t Me”. Six times yesterday, he refused to apologise to these EU citizens who have been disenfranchised. Can I suggest that he change the record and perhaps take his cue from Timbaland, and “Apologize”—apologise to those European citizens who have every right to vote in these elections, but were turned away on polling day?

**Kevin Foster:** It does seem like a bit of a broken record from the Labour party, and not an acceptance that this is exactly the same process EU citizens had to follow to vote in European parliamentary elections while the Labour party were in government. The best assessment will be the one done by the Electoral Commission, which will do so independently, following a statutory duty to review major polling events.

**3. Steve Double** (St Austell and Newquay) (Con): What steps the Government are taking to support the recognition in 2014 under the Council of Europe framework convention for the protection of national minorities of the Cornish people as a national minority in the UK.

**The Cornish People**

**Steve Double:** I thank the Minister for his answer. In 2014, when the decision was made by the Council of Europe, the Government welcomed the decision and said that this would give the Cornish the same recognition as the other Celtic parts of the UK. Does the Minister share my view that, to keep this commitment, the Cornish
should be allowed to identify in the forthcoming census as Cornish by way of a tick-box, just as the Scots, Welsh and Northern Irish will be able to do?

Kevin Foster: I always welcome the determination shown by my hon. Friend to be a strong Cornish voice for Cornwall in the Chamber and to put the county first on the agenda. The Government will be guided by the recommendation of the Office for National Statistics to the Government and Parliament about the demand for particular questions when we lay the census orders before Parliament later this year.

Scott Mann (North Cornwall) (Con): One of the best ways in which the Department could recognise Cornish minority status is to drop the ludicrous suggestion of having a Cornwall-Devon boundary review. Will the Minister commit to giving the Cornish the same rights as the Welsh and the Scots?

Kevin Foster: The boundary review is independent, and in due course we will bring the orders before the House so that it can make a decision.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP) rose—

Mr Speaker: I rise with a degree of uncertainty, because ordinarily I seek to accommodate the hon. Lady, but the question has not been broadened by the character and contents of the answer, and I gently point out that Glasgow Central is a considerable distance from Cornwall. If she is sufficiently dextrous and can shoe horn an inquiry on Cornwall into a question about Cornwall that would be helpful.

Alison Thewliss: Thank you, Mr Speaker, for your indulgence. Protection of the Cornish language is important, but there is no right, as there is for the Welsh, to write to the UK Government in Cornish, or to write to the UK Government in Gaelic and receive a response in that language. Would the Minister consider a UK language protection Bill that would protect Cornish and Scots Gaelic in the same way that Welsh is protected?

Kevin Foster: We can see that Celtic roots are strong, both in Cornwall and in Scotland, and that there is a link between them. We are always keen to help to promote the culture of these isles, and the different languages that are spoken across them are part of our vibrant United Kingdom. The Cabinet is always open to suggestions about how we can better do that, as the Department is keen to promote our Union.

Voter ID Pilots

4. Alex Norris (Nottingham North) (Lab/Co-op): What estimate has he made of the number of people in voter ID pilot areas who could not vote in the May 2019 local elections because they were unable to meet ID requirements.

11. Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): What estimate has he made of the number of people in voter ID pilot areas who could not vote in the May 2019 local elections because they were unable to meet ID requirements.

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Kevin Foster): The Government are delivering a programme of work to strengthen the integrity of our electoral system and ensure that elections are secure and fit for the 21st century. Validated figures will be published as part of the evaluations undertaken both by the Cabinet Office and by the independent Electoral Commission of the 2019 pilots.

Alex Norris: According to interim figures for the pilot areas in May, 800 people were denied a vote because of ID requirements, yet last year there were only eight reported cases of personation fraud across the whole country. Is not the reality that this is not about protecting our electoral system—it is about voter suppression?

Kevin Foster: If it was so bad, why did the Labour party introduce a system of voter ID in Northern Ireland that has had no noticeable impact on voter turnout? To be clear, this is about securing the ballot, and we look forward to the Electoral Commission’s conclusions on the pilots.

Mr Cunningham: Does the Minister not agree that electoral fraud is rare in this country and could be tackled locally? If he thinks that is how it should be tackled, will he help local government with resources?

Kevin Foster: It is always a pleasure to be asked a question by the hon. Gentleman. We are taking a range of measures to secure the protection of our electoral system, and I do not think that an ID check that originated in the 19th century and that was based on a small percentage of the community—and I must say, men—voting, where everyone was known, is still fit in the 21st century.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): Most people would think that voter ID requirements are perfectly reasonable. On the pilots, what steps were taken comprehensively to ensure that people were aware of the requirements?

Kevin Foster: I thank my hon. Friend for his question. A range of work was done locally, supported by the Electoral Commission and the Cabinet Office with councils’ consent, to ensure that voters were aware of the requirements. The indications so far are that that has been successful, but of course we will look at the Electoral Commission’s independent review before making further decisions on the process.

Candidates with Disabilities

5. Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): What plans the Government has to encourage more candidates with disabilities to stand for election.

The Minister without Portfolio (Brandon Lewis): The Government are working with disability organisations to help political parties better support disabled candidates. In December 2018, we launched the £250,000 EnAble fund, providing grants that cover disability-related expenses that people might face when seeking elected office.

Alex Chalk: I have met many talented students with disabilities in Cheltenham from the National Star College, so I commend my right hon. Friend for removing
disability expenses from the electoral spending limits. Surely, that should apply across the United Kingdom. Does he not agree that it should be rolled out to Wales, too?

Brandon Lewis: My hon. Friend makes a very good point. That is, of course, a matter for the Welsh Labour party in the Welsh Assembly. We have taken the view here that excluding disability-related expenses is vital to closing the gap between candidates with disabilities and candidates without disabilities, therefore enhancing equality of opportunity.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): In supporting candidates with disabilities to stand in elections, does the Minister not agree that there could be a further benefit? It could result in the voting population of those with disabilities coming to the voting booths in person to vote for disabled or able-bodied candidates.

Brandon Lewis: The hon. Gentleman makes a very good point. It is good for us to ensure we have candidates from all backgrounds and all abilities, with candidates with disabilities having the opportunity to stand. There is a duty on all of us in political parties to do that. I am very proud that the Conservative party has a fund to support candidates who need extra help.

Sir David Evennett (Bexleyheath and Crayford) (Con): I welcome my right hon. Friend’s comments in answer to this question. Does he agree that we all want to encourage maximum participation to ensure we get the very best candidates to stand and participate in all elections?

Brandon Lewis: My right hon. Friend makes a very good point. That is absolutely right, and as I say, it is why I am very proud to be the chairman of a party that has a fund, through the Conservative Foundation, that puts money into supporting candidates in that way. It is for all of us in all political parties to support candidates of all types and abilities to come forward, stand and represent their constituents.

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): May I encourage the Minister to look at hidden disabilities, such as fibromyalgia and ME, as well as physical disabilities, to ensure that people with hidden disabilities who live permanently in America, I cannot for the life of me understand why I am very proud that the Conservative party has a fund to support candidates who need extra help.

Brandon Lewis: Yes. The hon. Gentleman is right. It is for all of us to ensure we have a holistic approach to make sure nobody is ever left behind and everybody has a chance to reach their full potential.

Cyber-security

7. Craig Tracey (North Warwickshire) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to help improve the cyber-security of public and private sector organisations.

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Minister for the Cabinet Office (Mr David Lidington): The National Cyber Security Centre provides expert technical advice to Departments and Government contractors, but also to the wider private and public sectors, on how to prevent, detect and recover from cyber-attacks.

Craig Tracey: I thank my right hon. Friend for that answer. Does he agree that, while it is important to ensure we protect the Government from attacks to new systems, we protect legacy systems, too?

Mr Lidington: I completely agree. Whoever leads the next Government, it would be good advice for the relevant Department to take forward a consolidated bid in the next public spending round, so that this issue can be tackled on a cross-Government basis.

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): Providing national insurance data can be at the root of the difficulties that young people face when registering to vote. Will the Minister identify how Departments can better share data with local councils to help more people exercise their democratic right and still ensure cyber-security?

Mr Lidington: We are looking at the potential reform of the canvassing operation by local authorities to compile the electoral register. As the hon. Gentleman will appreciate, there is a fine balance to be struck between the benefits one gets from data sharing between different Government agencies and the importance of maintaining the confidentiality of very sensitive private data.

Jo Platt (Leigh) (Lab/Co-op): Today, the Public Accounts Committee found that, incredibly, a third of the funding for the Government’s cyber-security strategy has been transferred or loaned to other Government projects and that £69 million of cyber-funding has been taken from the strategy completely. Will the Minister confirm whether that is because the Government do not think our cyber-security is an important priority for them, or whether that is because even national security is not exempt from Tory austerity?

Mr Lidington: What the report shows very clearly is that the cyber-security of this country, and particularly of Government Departments and agencies, has been strengthened since the introduction and implementation of the national cyber-security strategy. The work that the National Cyber Security Centre, in particular, is leading on is helping Government Departments and the private sector alike to keep in touch with the developing and changing nature of the threat and to raise our defences accordingly.

Overseas Electors

8. Sir David Amess (Southend West) (Con): What plans has he to change the 15-year time limit on participation by overseas electors in UK elections.

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Kevin Foster): The Government are committed to scrapping the arbitrary 15-year rule. We were disappointed that the Overseas Electors Bill from my hon. Friend the Member for Montgomeryshire (Glyn Davies) did not succeed, but we remain committed to implementing votes for life and are considering the next steps to deliver that.

Sir David Amess: Is my hon. Friend aware that not everyone is enthusiastic about these changes, starting with me? Even though it would affect two of my daughters, who live permanently in America, I cannot for the life
of me understand the justification for these changes. Will he also comment on reciprocal arrangements for non-nationals voting here?

**Kevin Foster:** I thank my hon. Friend for his question, but I have to disagree with him. I am clear that we need to take the choice that is right for this country and our citizens who live abroad, many of whom have literally fought for this country and still retain very strong emotional connections to it and an interest in its affairs. That is why the Government’s view is that the 15-year limit is arbitrary and should be removed.

**Government Procurement**

9. **Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi** (Slough) (Lab): What progress the Government have made towards their target of spending 33% of central Government procurement with small and medium-sized enterprises by 2022.

**The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Oliver Dowden):** We are doing more than ever to encourage SMEs in public procurement. Recently published figures show an increase in spend from the previous year. Examples of measures that we have taken include streamlining procurement processes and improving transparency and, from September, we will be able to exclude suppliers that fail to pay subcontractors on time.

**Mr Dhesi:** Research from the Federation of Small Businesses shows that 25% of businesses that are in supply chains for public infrastructure projects experience late payment more than half the time. Along with the Government lagging dismally behind their target of spending 33% of central Government procurement with SMEs by 2022, is this not yet more evidence that they simply do not represent the interests of small businesses?

**Oliver Dowden:** I would have thought that the hon. Gentleman would welcome figures that show we are spending more with small businesses than ever before. On his point about prompt payment, we set a very challenging target of 90% of undisputed invoices from SMEs being paid within five days and we are meeting that for most Departments.

**Topical Questions**

T1. **Lloyd Russell-Moyle** (Brighton, Kemptown) (Lab/Co-op): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

**The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Minister for the Cabinet Office (Mr David Lidington):** We are now moving towards the 20th anniversary of devolution in Scotland and Wales and we are making every effort possible to restore devolved Government in Northern Ireland. Under this Government, the devolved Parliaments have been given more powers than ever before, with new powers over income tax, transport and the benefit system, and we have been clear that, when the United Kingdom leaves the European Union, a significant number of powers will flow back to those Parliaments. We are committed to upholding the devolution settlements and to strengthening the Union between all parts of the United Kingdom. [Interruption.]

**Mr Speaker:** I am not sure that the Minister is being accorded the respectful attention that his celebrity status within Her Majesty’s Government warrants, and I hope that there can be an improvement on that in the minutes ahead.

**Lloyd Russell-Moyle:** Yesterday, during the urgent question, the Government were asked how many names of EU citizens were transmitted from this country to other countries after the 7 May deadline. What is the Government’s response to the fact that, under the directive, article 9.4 says that EU citizens shall remain eligible to vote in perpetuity and not have to fill in additional forms?

**The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Kevin Foster):** The process was exactly the same as for previous European parliamentary elections and I urge the hon. Gentleman to look at the independent review that the Electoral Commission will do following the poll.

T2. **Nigel Huddleston** (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): What are the Government doing to encourage maximum participation in elections and, in particular, to encourage young people to register to vote?

**The Minister without Portfolio (Brandon Lewis):** The Government are committed to ensuring that all citizens feel empowered to participate in democracy. In the Cabinet Office, we have delivered projects to promote and encourage participation among young people, including a scheme to recruit and train some 1,000 youth democracy ambassadors. I know that my hon. Friend has personally worked very hard on this issue and I give great credit to him for that, because political parties have a role to play in getting young people involved in politics as well. I am very proud that, in the Conservative party, with his good work, we have seen over 100 new young Conservative branches in just a year.

**Peter Grant** (Glenrothes) (SNP): We know that the Government have been spending a lot of our money on private polling to find out what the people of Scotland think about their so-called precious Union. Are there any plans for similar polling to find out what the people of Scotland think of the demand that our health service be sacrificed to curry favour with Donald Trump?

**Mr Lidington:** The Prime Minister could not have been clearer yesterday that the future of the NHS will not be on the table in trade negotiations. The hon. Gentleman would be better advised to focus on the need to improve the declining standards in the Scottish NHS, for which his party is responsible.

T3. **Mark Pawsey** (Rugby) (Con): A number of former Rugby residents who live abroad, including Claire Nirecombe, who lives in France and who I still represent here, have told me about their wish to retain their voting rights in the UK. The Minister has already referred to the commitment to allow British nationals to retain their voting rights. Can he clarify when that will be delivered?
Kevin Foster: My hon. Friend’s examples show why an arbitrary 15-year limit is not correct. The Government are considering their options to bring this forward at the earliest opportunity.

Mr Lidington: It was the First Minister herself who said that the 2014 referendum was a once-in-a-generation decision. I believe that we should take her at her word during that referendum campaign and uphold the clear will of the Scottish people as expressed in the 2014 referendum.

Kirstene Hair (Angus) (Con): As my hon. Friend the Member for Banff and Buchan (David Duguid) has said, Nicola Sturgeon laid the draft legislation for a second independence referendum last week, but with only one in five Scots supporting what she is doing. Can the Minister assure me that his Department is doing all it can to protect and preserve our United Kingdom, which we are so proud to be part of?

Mr Lidington: The Government believe, and I believe the majority of people in Scotland continue to believe, that all of us are stronger by being proud of being not only Scottish, English, Welsh or Northern Irish, but part of a union of four nations in the United Kingdom.

The Prime Minister was asked—

Engagements

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Minister for the Cabinet Office (Mr David Lidington): I have been asked to reply.

My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister is in Portsmouth today, with other world leaders, to commemorate the 75th anniversary of the D-day landings. The commemoration will involve more than 4,000 personnel in D-day events in the United Kingdom and France and representatives of every country that fought alongside the United Kingdom in Operation Overlord—and, appropriately, our former adversaries as well. I am sure that Members in all parts of the House will want to join me in sending our very best wishes to our Muslim constituents here in the United Kingdom, and to Muslims around the world who are celebrating Eid al-Fitr.

I had meetings with ministerial colleagues and others earlier today, and I shall have further such meetings later.

Tim Loughton: As my right hon. Friend has said, today in Portsmouth and tomorrow in Normandy, we honour the veterans and the 150,000 British, American, Canadian and other allied troops who led the charge to liberate Europe from the real Nazi scum. Does my right hon. Friend agree that, when a minority of hate-fuelled demonstrators yell “Nazi scum” in the faces of American tourists and intimidate others who are legitimately welcoming the visit of the American President, however we may take issue with him—and when, regrettably, they are spurred on by certain hon. Members—they attack the greatest alliance of free nations, and demean the memory of those brave troops and veterans whose sacrifice secured the right of all of us to free speech and lawful protest?
Incidentally, Mr Speaker, we are so fortunate to have an opportunity to commemorate one of the most significant days in modern history. As we celebrate the 75th anniversary of the D-day landings, which are under way across the channel to enjoy today the freedom to express our views publicly, to assemble and demonstrate our points of view, and to argue peacefully against another in this place, is derived from the courage and the sacrifice of the wartime generation, whether from the United Kingdom, the United States of America, or our other allies. We should remember and salute that courage and that sacrifice, and should not demean it by engaging in the sort of disgraceful behaviour to which my hon. Friend has referred.

Rebecca Long Bailey (Salford and Eccles) (Lab): It is a pleasure to step in on behalf of my colleagues today and, indeed, to stand opposite the right hon. Gentleman. I echo his comments about the marking of the 75th anniversary of the D-day landings, which are being commemorated in Portsmouth today. We must never forget the extraordinary sacrifices of all those who landed in Normandy on that day, and the achievements of our servicemen and women who came together to fight fascism and protect our freedom.

I, too, wish a happy Eid al-Fitr to all our Muslim friends throughout the United Kingdom. Let me also express solidarity with all the women who are fighting pension injustice in court and outside Parliament today.

I congratulate both English teams who competed in the Champions League final on Saturday. It pains me, as a Manchester United fan, to congratulate Liverpool on their victory, although—fair play—Liverpool fans did rename “Margaret Thatcher Square” in Madrid “Jeremy Corbyn Square”. I reckon that that deserves brownie points, even from a Man United fan.

Yesterday, the Prime Minister had to repeat to President Trump a journalist’s question about whether the NHS was on the table yesterday. It pains me, as a Manchester United fan, to congratulate Liverpool on their victory, although—fair play—Liverpool fans did rename “Margaret Thatcher Square” in Madrid “Jeremy Corbyn Square”. I reckon that that deserves brownie points, even from a Man United fan.

Mr Liddington: I agree with every word that my hon. Friend has just said. It is worth our reminding ourselves that the fact that we and our neighbouring countries across the channel enjoy today the freedom to express our views publicly, to assemble and demonstrate our points of view, and to argue peacefully against one another in this place, is derived from the courage and the sacrifice of the wartime generation, whether from the United Kingdom, the United States of America, or our other allies. We should remember and salute that courage and that sacrifice, and should not demean it by engaging in the sort of disgraceful behaviour to which my hon. Friend has referred.

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Given that the Prime Minister was silent on the matter, was on the table as part of a United States trade deal. Trump a journalist’s question about whether the NHS brownie points, even from a Man United fan.

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Mr Liddington: Yes, the Prime Minister did raise climate change with the President yesterday and she made it clear at their joint press conference yesterday afternoon that she had done that. We are very proud of this country’s commitment to the international agreements to reduce global carbon emissions and we have a better track record in reducing those emissions than any other G7 member state.

Rebecca Long Bailey: The statistics that the right hon. Gentleman referred to relate to emissions cuts since 2010, when the UK benefited from policies put in place by the last Labour Government—policies that have since been dismantled. But how much authority do this Government actually have on this issue? Three current Cabinet Ministers have denied the scientific consensus on climate change, and several of those standing in the Tory leadership contest have close links with organisations and individuals promoting climate denial. It does not bode well. Figures released in April show that the UK is set to miss its own carbon budgets by an ever-widening margin. Would the right hon. Gentleman like to explain why the Government are off track in respect of meeting their own targets?

Mr Liddington: We are not off track in respect of meeting those targets. Since 2010, the United Kingdom has decarbonised our economy faster than any other G7 country. We generate now a record amount of electricity from renewable energy sources and we have just gone through the longest period in our history without relying on electricity generated from coal. That stands starkly against what appears to be the Labour party’s declared policy, which is to reopen the coal mines but not actually to burn the coal that they mine.

Rebecca Long Bailey: Let me be clear: the Labour party does not condone the reopening of any coal mine to be used for energy purposes. Once again, the right hon. Gentleman refers to climate emissions reductions that were implemented using Labour party policy—Labour policies that have since been dismantled. Not only are the Government failing to meet their targets, but last year actually saw the smallest drop in carbon emissions in the last six years: just 2%. At that rate it would take until the end of the century to reach net zero emissions. Just yesterday, the Financial Times reported that the Government are accused of trying to “fiddle its emissions figures”, ignoring their official advisers. So let me ask the right hon. Gentleman a simple policy question: the Labour party has committed to banning fracking. Will the Government ban fracking and allow new onshore wind in England—yes or no?
Mr Lidington: What the Government are committed to is to reducing emissions in line with our domestic and global targets. We have not only met but outperformed our first and second carbon budgets, and we are on track towards meeting the third. For some time into the future, there will be a need to use gas as a transitional fuel, but it is much less polluting than other forms of hydrocarbon-based energy and it will therefore be a good source during the transition period while we make ready to move to a completely decarbonised economy.

Rebecca Long Bailey: This is absolutely staggering. The Government promote fracking, which is backed by only 12% of the public, yet they effectively block onshore wind, which is backed by 79% of the public. New solar is down 94% and home insulation is down 98%. Parliament has declared a climate emergency, yet there is no evidence that this Government take it seriously. We need a green industrial revolution to tackle climate change. The Swansea tidal lagoon alone would have required 100,000 tonnes of steel, mainly from Port Talbot, but the Government refused to back it. Will the right hon. Gentleman tell us what the Government have actually done to support our steel industry since signing the steel charter?

Mr Lidington: If we look at what is actually happening in the real world, rather than at the ideological tracts that the hon. Lady appears to spend her time reading, we see that there are already about 400,000 jobs in low-carbon businesses and their supply chains throughout the United Kingdom, with scope for much more low-carbon growth to support up to 2 million jobs in the future. We have now received advice from the independent Committee on Climate Change about how to time and to legislate for our transition to a completely decarbonised economy, and we will be bringing forward later this year our decisions on how and when we will be taking that action.

Rebecca Long Bailey: The independent Committee on Climate Change has repeatedly criticised the Government’s approach to decarbonising our economy. I note that there was not a single word in the right hon. Gentleman’s response on what the Government will provide for the steel industry, and people from Redcar to Scunthorpe know that his empty rhetoric will not solve their catastrophe. Climate change is an existential threat. To safeguard our future, we will need to mobilise all our resources, just like we did when we rebuilt Britain after the second world war. If we took the challenge seriously, we could create hundreds of thousands of jobs in low-carbon industries, reverse decades of decline in our de-industrialised areas and lead the world in renewable technologies, but the Government are letting us down. They have recklessly run the clock down on Brexit, and is it not the truth that their failure is now running down the clock on our planet?

Mr Lidington: The hon. Lady asks about Government help for the steel industry. The answer to her question is that we have provided taxpayer-funded subsidies to cut energy costs in the steel industry. We have also supported globally, and introduced here, trade defence measures to shut out unfair competition and the dumping of steel. When I was in Sheffield a few days ago, I talked to specialist steilmakers in South Yorkshire who welcomed this Government’s commitment to the advanced manufacturing centre there and to the work we are doing on technical and vocational training. They were optimistic about the future of steelmaking and manufacturing in this country under the policies that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy has been taking through.

When I looked at the hon. Lady’s video about the Labour party’s new commitment to what it terms a green industrial revolution, I saw that it concluded with a focus on words about renationalisation and bringing industries back into public ownership, as if that were the way forward. We know from the CBI that the cost of that would be £176 billion, taken from the pockets of taxpayers throughout the United Kingdom. That money could be used to build 3 million new homes. Those Labour policies would put at risk the finances of decent working families in every part of this country.

Q2. [911090] Mr Marcus Fysh (Yeovil) (Con): Somerset has been helping to illustrate the huge national challenge that we face in social care through a powerful “Panorama” programme, the final part of which airs tonight. Will the right hon. Gentleman join me in paying tribute to all those in caring roles and commit to addressing their funding needs fully?

Mr Lidington: I thank my hon. Friend for highlighting this important issue. We are committed to ensuring that people of all ages have access to the care and support that they need; that is why we have given local authorities access to nearly £4 billion more for adult social care this year.

However, we recognise that we also need to make sure that best practice is observed across all local authorities and NHS trusts, where the evidence is that delayed discharges are higher in some areas than others. We will be publishing the Green Paper at the earliest opportunity to set out the hard strategic choices that will face the Government, whoever leads the Government in the months to come, and to describe proposals to ensure that the social care system is sustainable over the longer term.

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): I associate myself and my Scottish National party colleagues with the comments of others. Our thoughts are with the veterans gathered in Portsmouth today to commemorate the anniversary of D-day. Today is also World Environment Day—an important reminder that climate change remains the biggest challenge facing the world. I also wish a very happy Eid Mubarak to all those celebrating across the UK today.

Yesterday, Donald Trump said that the NHS was “on the table” in the trade talks with the UK. Today, he says he is not so sure. This is someone who does not even believe in climate change—a President who simply cannot be trusted. Why, then, are the UK Government so obsessed with pursuing a trade deal that puts Scotland’s NHS at risk?

Mr Lidington: The Government are not putting the NHS at risk in Scotland or anywhere else, and the Prime Minister has made that very clear indeed. What I fear is putting standards at risk at the NHS in Scotland is the SNP’s obsession with constitutional matters and the referendum rather than focusing on the better delivery of public services.
Kirsty Blackman: We have the best performing NHS in the UK, with the highest number of GPs per head of population. If this week has proven anything, it is that there is no guarantee that our NHS is safe. In 2014, Westminster promised that Scotland’s NHS would be in public hands for as long as the people of Scotland wanted that. But now this Tory Government is actively working to deny the Scottish Parliament the powers to safeguard our NHS and protect our public services.

The truth is that, under this Government, Scotland will not have a veto—we may not even have a say. The Scottish Government will never allow our precious NHS to be signed away in a Tory-Trump trade deal. If the Minister and his fellow MPs cannot make that same pledge here today, they will never, ever be forgiven.

Mr Lidington: At the risk of repeating myself, under this Government, and under the stewardship of anyone on the Government Benches, the NHS is not going to be up for grabs in a trade negotiation with the United States or with anybody else at all. When the hon. Lady talks about the need for a voice for Scotland, she ought to have more confidence in the ability of herself and her colleagues to represent the interests of Scotland here in debates and in the Committees on which they sit. At the moment, they are leaving it to my 13 Conservative colleagues to be the true voice of Scotland.

Q4. [911092] Mr Mark Harper (Forest of Dean) (Con): I know from personal experience what it takes to win a seat from the Labour party, and hold it. Does my right hon. Friend agree that every community in this country needs a strong voice in this place? The people of Peterborough have the opportunity tomorrow to elect Paul Bristow to give them that voice and to replace the failed Labour MP who ended up in jail.

Mr Lidington: I very much endorse what my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister said about the campaign. I have known Paul Bristow for many years. He’s a formidable candidate who I am sure will be a formidable advocate for Peterborough.

Q5. [911093] David T. C. Davies (Monmouth) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend think it acceptable that people with access to large sums of money are able to bring about private prosecutions in a way that undermines freedom of speech in this country?

Mr Lidington: Let me say two things. First, I believe that freedom of speech is one of our most precious inheritances from previous generations, and we should do everything we can in this place and outside to uphold that principle. When it comes to any specific case, it would clearly be wrong for me to pass comment on something that is before the courts.

Q7. [911095] Jo Stevens (Cardiff Central) (Lab): Last weekend my constituency suffered yet more serious violent crime, some in the public domain and some not, including the murder of 18-year-old Fahad Mohamed Nur and a knife attack on the congregation leaving Dar Ul-Isra mosque following Ramadan prayers. Since 2010, under Liberal Democrat and Conservative Governments, South Wales police funding has been cut by nearly £61 million. Police officers in Cardiff are running on empty. What will it take for this shambles of a Government to accept responsibility for public safety and give South Wales police the funding it desperately needs?

Mr Lidington: South Wales police is actually receiving up to £290 million of funding in the current financial year, which is an increase of £19 million on the last financial year. To get to grips with serious crime—no one would have anything but sympathy for the victims to whom she refers and their families—we also need to look at what drives young men in particular, towards gang membership and participation in violent crime. My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary, in partnership with other Ministers, is now leading that work, which I hope will bring benefits to the hon. Lady’s constituency and many others.

Q6. [911094] Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con): The motor industry is vital to the economy of Rugby and the west midlands, so is my right hon. Friend concerned to see that UK manufacturing statistics from the Society of Motor Manufacturers and Traders show that in April production fell by 44% because of factory shutdowns for the expected uncertainty of a 29 March Brexit? Does he agree that this should act as a wake-up call to ensure that the same thing does not happen again on 31 October by leaving the EU with a deal that takes away the uncertainty that is so damaging to our manufacturers?

Mr Lidington: My hon. Friend makes a very important point; the car industry is one of the most important sectors—but by no means the only one—in this country that relies heavily on just-in-time, cross-border supply chains with enterprises in other member states of the European Union. That is why the Government remain focused on ensuring that our departure from the EU is smooth and orderly, and with a deal that allows for those just-in-time supply chains to be protected.

Q8. [911096] Matthew Pennycook (Greenwich and Woolwich) (Lab): Of the many collective challenges we face, none is more essential—more urgent—than climate breakdown. The legislation required to commit the UK
to phasing out carbon emissions entirely by mid-century is simple and has almost certainly been drafted, and this House would pass it in a matter of days. This issue is simply too pressing to wait for later this year or a future Administration. We have the parliamentary time, so what possible reason can the Minister give for why the Government cannot commit to enshrine net zero emissions into law now?

Mr Lidington: May I first congratulate the hon. Gentleman and his partner—I have looked at his Twitter feed—on the imminent birth of their second child later this year? I wish both he and his partner well. On his question, it was this Government who went to the independent Committee on Climate Change to ask for advice about how, and over what timeframe, to make that move to complete decarbonisation. We have only very recently received that advice. It will clearly need to be considered within Government, and we want to bring forward our decision at the earliest possible opportunity, because I share his view of the importance of getting on with this.

Q10. [911098] Chris Green (Bolton West) (Con): Difficult times often call for new leadership and a new vision, so will my right hon. Friend join me in supporting Bolton’s future high streets fund and the recovery of Bolton, after 40 years of Labour misrule?

Mr Lidington: I thank the hon. Gentleman for highlighting this initiative in Bolton. As he knows, high streets are changing, and the Government are committed to helping communities such as Bolton to adapt to that change. We have already set in hand the £675 million future high streets fund, and we welcome Bolton Council’s applications, which are being assessed, alongside other applications. We will make an announcement about the places that are successful later this summer, and I know that my hon. Friend will continue to be a very doughty champion for his city.

Q9. [911097] Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): My local NHS is cutting GP hours while it and NHS England are forced to subsidise a private company, Babylon GP at hand, which has sucked up more than 50,000 patients for its controversial app-based system, undermining GPs across London and beyond. Given that the Health Secretary is Babylon’s biggest cheerleader, why should my constituents trust this Government to keep the NHS public any more than they would trust Donald Trump?

Mr Lidington: NHS England is, I understand, increasing the baseline funding of the Hammersmith and Fulham clinical commissioning group to ensure that it is not financially disadvantaged by hosting GP at hand. But to improve its service to patients, the NHS is going to need to embrace innovation. Digital technologies such as those used by GP at hand do offer convenience for patients and often allow clinicians to work more efficiently. That is why our new GP contract gives everyone the right to digital first primary care, including web and video consultations from 2021, if that is what they want to receive.

Q11. [911099] Robert Courts (Witney) (Con): Seventy-five years ago tonight, the first steps in the liberation of Europe were taken by the Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire Light Infantry, when they flew by glider to liberate Pegasus bridge. As the Dakotas over Normandy commemorate this feat, will my right hon. Friend join me in celebrating and commemorating all the ordinary and yet extraordinary men and women, from every corner of our country, who turned the tide of the war in freedom’s favour?

Mr Lidington: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for highlighting the particular example of Pegasus bridge and the heroics shown by servicemen from our two counties. He is right that today we need to pay tribute to the men and women who took part in the success of Operation Overlord, from whichever part of the United Kingdom or from whichever allied country they came.

Q12. [911100] Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): Far too many people in our uniformed public services are taking their own lives, but we do not know the true extent of the tragedies as Ministers do not require the data to be collected. Does the Minister agree that the police, armed forces and prison services should follow the lead of the fire service and record the number of people in their service who take their own lives?

Mr Lidington: The hon. Gentleman makes a good point. I know that he is due to meet Ministers from the Ministry of Justice fairly soon to talk about whether the MOJ could introduce similar practices for its services; I will draw his question to the attention of the Minister for Policing, to see whether a comparable meeting can be established with the Home Office.

Joseph Johnson (Orpington) (Con): Petts Wood in the London Borough of Bromley is designated an area of special residential character, but it has suffered from inconsistent decision making at the hands of the unaccountable Planning Inspectorate. Will my right hon. Friend use his good offices to help me to secure the meeting that I have long been requesting but that the Planning Inspectorate has for some reason consistently declined?

Mr Lidington: I am happy, in the first instance, to ensure that my hon. Friend has a meeting with the relevant Minister in the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government. I hope that that will enable him to find a way forward.

Mr Speaker: It would be a gross discourtesy if it were otherwise. It is extraordinary that the hon. Gentleman should have to ask for a meeting, but there we are. He is going to get his meeting.

Q13. [911101] Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): The US President said yesterday that the NHS would be on the table in any trade negotiation, and the Prime Minister did not intervene to stop him. The Lib Dems and Tories voted through the Health and Social Care Act 2012, which opened up the NHS to the US market, and 10% of it is already privatised. The Brexit party leader has no issue with US private healthcare insurance replacing our NHS. No party can be trusted with our NHS—except the Labour party. Is Labour now the only hope to save our NHS?
Mr Lidington: One does get a bit sick of these scare stories after a while. The hon. Lady might like to pretend otherwise, but the majority of contracting out to the private sector in the NHS did not take place under a Conservative Administration; it took place under the Labour Government, with Andy Burnham urging that it be accelerated. The truth is that during the NHS’s 70-year lifetime, it has had more years under Conservative stewardship than under Labour stewardship. If we look at what is happening today, we see the NHS getting the biggest cash boost ever in its history and a long-term plan for its future, made possible by Conservative policies.

Douglas Ross (Moray) (Con): I remind the House of my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests.

I echo what the Minister said about our teams that are going to the World cup and their performances later this month. This country is further represented by the three match officials who have been selected: Sian Massey and Lisa Rashid from England, and my colleague from Scotland Kylie Cockburn. Will my right hon. Friend join me in congratulating them on the dedication, commitment and ability as match officials that has seen them called up to the World cup, and will he wish all our match officials a successful and productive tournament?

Mr Lidington: I felt that perhaps the shop steward for the amalgamated union of association football officials was speaking then. I am very happy to join my hon. Friend in congratulating Sian, Lisa and Kylie on their having been selected as assistant referees. It is a first-class achievement and I wish them, as well as both teams, all success for the World cup.

Q14. [911103] Colleen Fletcher (Coventry North East) (Lab): Pupils from St Gregory’s Primary School in my constituency recently wrote to me regarding the problem of plastic pollution in our environment. They rightly pointed out the damage that plastic waste causes to marine life and human life as it makes its way up the food chain. As a result, they are calling on the Government to introduce a deposit return scheme that will reduce the amount of plastic that ends up in landfill and our oceans. On this World Environment Day does the Minister agree with the pupils of St Gregory’s Primary School?

Mr Lidington: I think I can give the hon. Lady an encouraging message to take back to the pupils of St Gregory’s school, which is that, under the leadership of my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for the Environment, the Government have launched a resources and waste strategy, which includes consulting on plans to introduce consistent recycling for all households, consulting on a deposit return scheme to drive up the recycling of cans and bottles and plans for producers to pay the full cost of managing packaging waste for extended producer responsibility. I think that that makes a good package.

Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con): Thirty years ago this week, some 2,000 democrats—maybe more, but we will never know the number—were murdered in Tiananmen Square. Even now in China, a great firewall prevents Wikipedia, Google and others from communicating with the Chinese people. Although China has moved on, does my right hon. Friend not think it the height of hypocrisy that those who demonstrated against the President of America chose not to demonstrate against the President of China when he came here?

Mr Lidington: My hon. Friend makes a telling point about the inconsistency in standards among some leading members of this House. It was indeed 30 years yesterday since the tragic and shocking events in which so many people lost their lives while protesting peacefully in and around Tiananmen Square. The sad truth today is that people in China are still unable to exercise their right to protest peacefully—a right given to them by international agreements to which the Chinese Government have signed up. We continue to urge the Chinese Government to respect citizens’ freedom of association, assembly, expression and other fundamental rights and freedoms as is supposed to be enshrined in China’s constitution as well as in international law.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): Plaid Cymru leader Adam Price is commemorating the D-day landings at the Normandy memorial today. We share the feeling for all those people who were involved in that historical event.

I guess that, when President Trump’s visit was thought up months ago, the plan was that the UK would have left the EU. “Take back control”, they said, but what we saw this week was a vision of things to come: of razzle dazzle concealing the reality of sovereignty reduced to sycophancy. Some 68% of Welsh exports go to the EU. Only 14% of Welsh exports go to the US. Post-Brexit, the British Government will have to choose which deal to strike. Which deal would the Minister prioritise?

Mr Lidington: If the hon. Lady had been studying the various publications from the Government, she would have seen that our objective is to have a very close, deep future partnership on trade and other matters with our neighbours in the European Union while, at the same time, having the freedom to pursue trade deals with other parts of the world, including with the United States. I ask the hon. Lady to pause before condemning the state visit by the elected Head of State and Government of our staunchest ally at a time when we commemorate the 75th anniversary of the D-day landings and trying to criticise that for political purposes. We can disagree with President Trump—any of us is free to do so—but he is here as the elected Head of State of our staunch consistent ally and we should honour and respect him during that visit.

Steve Double (St Austell and Newquay) (Con): My right hon. Friend will be aware from his recent visit to Cornwall of the development potential of the space sector there. Therefore, I am sure he will join me in welcoming the announcement yesterday of £7.8 million of Government support for the development of Europe’s first horizontal spaceport in Cornwall. Will he also join me in congratulating all the Spaceport Cornwall team on their successful bid? Will he use his offices to ensure that the Government do everything they can to make sure that the regulations are in place to allow satellites to be launched as soon as possible? While he is on his feet, will he congratulate the Cornish rugby team on its excellent win on Sunday against Cheshire to become county champions?
Mr Lidington: I am delighted to congratulate the Cornish rugby team, as my hon. Friend invites me to do. I was also very pleased to see the decision being made to give that support to the Cornwall spaceport initiative. I remember very vividly meeting representatives of the spaceport during my visit to Goonhilly Earth Station earlier this year. There are some really exciting commercial opportunities available for Cornwall and the United Kingdom.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): In July 2016, my constituent Mr Goff was diagnosed with multiple myeloma, a form of blood cancer. He was treated with two lines of chemotherapy, and he initially responded well, but he had recurrent infections that required antibiotics. He went into remission in 2018, and his personal independence payment was stopped in December 2018. Mr Goff appealed the decision. Despite the fact that he was receiving treatment, his appeal was refused. In February, he was told that his cancer had relapsed—it is incurable. He is now being told that his mobility car will be repossessed this week. Removing his PIP will leave him short of money, unable to get to most of his daily appointments and at risk of infection when travelling on public transport. I appeal to everybody on the Government Benches: show some compassion. Someone intervene and stop this injustice.

Mr Lidington: The hon. Gentleman will appreciate that I do not know any more about the detail of his constituent’s case than what he has just set out before the House. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions is in her place on the Front Bench and will have heard what he said. I shall ask her to make sure that a Minister from that Department speaks to the hon. Gentleman urgently to get to the bottom of what has happened.

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): The National Readership Challenge launches today, and I particularly recommend to colleagues the conclusions on further education in the Government’s post-18 education review—to reverse the decline of core spending, to increase the unit funding rate and to allow for three-year funding plans. Does my right hon. Friend agree that that should be essential reading for Treasury Ministers before the autumn spending review and that more funding for further education would be very welcome?

Mr Lidington: My hon. Friend makes a very important point about the vital role that further education plays not only in equipping young men and women with the skills they need to give them good career opportunities, but often also in providing a passport to higher education at a later stage in their careers. The Augar review provides a blueprint for how we can make sure that everybody can follow the path that is right for them, and my hon. Friend is right to say that we need to study Augar’s conclusions carefully in the run-up to the forthcoming spending review.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald (Glasgow South) (SNP): Police Scotland prepared a report for the Crown Office on extraordinary rendition flights stopping at Scottish airports. Counter-terrorism officers and the Lord Advocate have made it clear that they require full access to the unredacted Senate intelligence committee report from the United States Government, who have so far refused to provide it, and that is prohibiting them from determining whether a crime was committed. Given that intelligence sharing is supposed to underpin our relationship with the US, has anyone from the Government raised this issue with President Trump while he has been here? If not, will the right hon. Gentleman pledge to do so on behalf of Scotland’s law enforcement agencies before President Trump departs UK soil today?

Mr Lidington: Unsurprisingly, and in line with precedent under all Governments, I am not prepared to discuss security intelligence matters on the Floor of the House, but I will draw the hon. Gentleman’s attention to the attention of those of my colleagues in the Government who are directly responsible for these areas of policy.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): My thoughts today are with my 94-year-old step-father, who has once again returned to Normandy to remember that it was soldiers, sailors and airmen from not only the UK and the US, but our allies—especially those all over the Commonwealth—who fought for our lives. May we use this moment to thank them, to thank those who serve in our armed forces today and to thank our Prime Minister, who, in her last few days in the job, is serving our country with great dignity?

Mr Lidington: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for her question. I am sure she will be able to take back to her stepfather a salute from the entire House for his service and that of his comrades in Normandy 75 years ago. I agree with every word she said.

Karl Turner (Kingston upon Hull East) (Lab): Twelve months ago, the Prime Minister told this House that she wanted a speedy resolution to the funding row between NHS England and Vertex regarding the drug Orkambi to treat cystic fibrosis. My seven-year-old constituent Oliver Ward wrote to the Prime Minister recently asking what progress she has made. Could the Minister please give Oliver some good news and tell him that he need not get up every day worrying about this terrible injustice?

Mr Lidington: I shall ask the Health Secretary or one of his team to contact the hon. Gentleman at the earliest opportunity to try to give Oliver the news that he wishes for.

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: May I assume that it relates to matters not of his team to contact the hon. Gentleman at the earliest opportunity to try to give Oliver the news that he wishes for.

Martin Docherty-Hughes: I would say so, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: Oh, very good.

Martin Docherty-Hughes: Speaking on a day on which we commemorate the freedom of Europe, it came to my attention at the weekend that a fellow member of the Council of Europe—the Georgian state, and especially its Ministry of the Interior—will not provide security
during Pride month to the first ever Pride march through Tbilisi. Given the history of anti-LGBT violence funded by the Russian state in previous years, I wonder, Mr Speaker, how we can convey not only to the Government of Georgia but to its ambassador in the United Kingdom that this House is not only concerned but gravely disappointed by their limitation on human dignity within the Georgian nation.

Mr Speaker: The hon. Gentleman has partly achieved his objective by the ruse—and I will call it the ruse—of a point of order, which conceivably could have been the substitute for a question that he might have wanted to ask. If that was his objective, he has achieved it. I cannot speak for the House as a whole, but to judge from debates that have taken place in this Chamber in recent years, my strong sense is that his point will have struck a chord. The idea that such a march should not be able to take place within a safe space, with its participants’ physical security underpinned, offends very strongly against our instincts, so I hope that such measures as are necessary to be taken by Georgians will be taken.

More widely, if I heard the hon. Gentleman correctly, he made what struck me as a wholly uncontroversial observation about the record of the Russian state in human rights generally and, more particularly, the protection—or rather the non-protection—of the rights of LGBT people. That is a profoundly unsatisfactory state of affairs, and it is about time it became more civilised in these important matters. [Interruption.] It is always good to have the sedentary support of the hon. Member for Lichfield (Michael Fabricant), and I thank him for what he has said.
Interim NHS People Plan

12.53 pm

Jonathan Ashworth (Leicester South) (Lab/Co-op) (Urgent Question): To ask the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care to make a statement on the interim NHS people plan.

The Minister for Health (Stephen Hammond): The NHS published its interim people plan on Monday, and I laid a written ministerial statement at the earliest opportunity yesterday.

The plan is a first, but critically important, step in ensuring that the NHS has the people, leadership and culture it needs to deliver the NHS long-term plan. The interim people plan has been developed by Baroness Dido Harding, the chair of NHS Improvement, in partnership with frontline staff, NHS employers and a wider range of other representative groups and stakeholders. It takes a tough look at the challenges facing people working across the NHS. It sets out how leaders will be supported to create cultures that empower staff and make sure that every member of staff, regardless of their background, will be able to progress.

Critically, the plan calls for all NHS organisations to set out how they will ensure that the NHS is the best place to work. The recently appointed chief people officer for the NHS will play a vital role in supporting the NHS to do this. The interim people plan sets out a number of practical steps to increase the supply of clinical staff. This includes an extra 5,000 additional clinical placements for nurse training places by September 2019 and a commitment to further expansion of medical school places.

Ultimately, the plan will ensure that the NHS is best able to retain the highly skilled and dedicated staff who choose a career in healthcare, including the most senior clinicians. Therefore, we have listened to their concerns that pension tax changes are discouraging them from doing extra work for patients. That is why Government will consult on how to introduce new flexibilities for this critically important staff group.

But we are not complacent. We know there is more work to do to secure the people, leadership and culture that the NHS needs. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has asked Baroness Harding to lead further work over the summer to prepare the final people plan. As has always been intended, the final people plan will be published soon after the conclusion of the spending review, when there will be further clarity on education funding developments, where budgets have again been cut, by a third. It says:

"Applications for nursing and midwifery courses have fallen since this Government. As Dido Harding’s report says, “Employers have…been investing less in their people, as pressures on NHS finances have grown."

Is that not an admission that Tory austerity, with nine years of underfunding in the NHS, has contributed to the workforce crisis of today?

The Health Secretary has said that he wants “a new Windrush Generation” of overseas nurses to fill the staffing gap, so can the Minister explain why a commitment to recruit 5,000 extra nurses a year internationally was dropped from the Dido Harding report? Did the Government put pressure on Baroness Harding? On international recruitment, can he guarantee that no one offered a job in the NHS or care sector will be restricted by the £30,000 salary cap, as the chair of Health Education England called for yesterday at the Health and Social Care Committee?

Finally, the Minister referenced the spending review. He will have seen that the Chief Secretary said yesterday at a Select Committee that the spending review is now unlikely to be ready for 2020-21. That means that new funding for training, for Health Education England and for capital investment in public health and social care will not come on stream until 2021—two years away. Does the Minister think that that is an acceptable way to deal with the NHS crisis we are facing? I urge the Minister, for whom I have a lot of respect, to accept that we cannot keep delaying this situation further. The Health Secretary needs to abandon his leadership games, focus on his day job and get a grip.
Stephen Hammond: The House will have listened to the hon. Gentleman. It is important to put out some facts, which were missing from his fact-free analysis. For example, we have had 52,000 more professionally qualified clinical staff in the last nine years, almost 16,500 more doctors and over 17,000 more nurses on our wards. He set out a list of promises, but with little detail and no means to pay for them. He asked a number of questions, which I will respond to.

The hon. Gentleman talked about the number of nurses and said that there was no plan. There clearly is. Increasing nursing is a priority, and this plan sets out—[Interruption.] If the hon. Member for Dewsbury (Paula Sherriff) would like to listen, this plan sets out a focus to ensure that we can recruit nurses. The hon. Gentleman talked about applications, but he will know that applications for nursing places are up 4% on the previous year. He will also know that the plan sets out 5,000 more clinical placements available in September this year, which is a 25% increase on the previous year. He will know that the plan sets out 7,500 more nursing associates. The plan also quite clearly sets out measures that will ensure that the NHS is the best place to work, and therefore more nurses will want to stay in it.

The hon. Gentleman spoke about a number of other issues. The Migration Advisory Committee has made recommendations, which he will have seen. He will know that the Secretary of State has made a firm commitment that we intend to continue to recruit internationally, as well as increasing domestic recruitment. He mentioned continuing professional development. It would be useful if he had read the plan, which sets out commitments to ensure continuing education and opportunities for education for all staff in the NHS. He will have seen that there will be a final level of commitment.

The hon. Gentleman speculates about the spending review. He speculates about a number of things, but it would be better not to speculate. It would also be better not to make allegations about my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State, who was doing his day job yesterday. I know that the hon. Gentleman is always interested in soundbites, and one soundbite he should have taken notice of was when my right hon. Friend said yesterday: “the NHS is not on the table in any trade talks. The NHS is not a notice of was when my right hon. Friend said yesterday: “

Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): We’ll see.

Stephen Hammond: Perhaps that is the soundbite that the hon. Gentleman and his colleagues—including the hon. Member for Dewsbury, who is shouting across the Chamber yet again—should remember.

Mr Kenneth Clarke (Rushcliffe) (Con): I welcome the Minister’s announcement that the Government are giving higher priority still to the recruitment and retention of staff in the NHS. It is an undeniable fact that there are acute shortages, particularly of nurses, in practically every part of the NHS, and we urgently need to improve our recruitment and retention. With that in mind, will he confirm that in finalising the people plan, serious consideration will be given to the immigration rules that will apply to recruitment after we leave the European Union? About one in 20 of the whole staff of the NHS at the moment are citizens of the European Union, and it would make no sense at all to put new restrictions of any kind on people coming from the European Union who want to make a valuable contribution to our health service. In Nottingham, we used to run recruitment campaigns for nurses as recently as last year. We are a long way away from being able to in any way put restrictions on staff coming from any part of the continent.

Stephen Hammond: My right hon. and learned Friend the Father of the House is completely correct. We want to make sure it is clear that the EU nationals who work in the national health service—there are more than 63,000 of them—are valued and make a huge contribution to our NHS. He will probably be aware that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State and the Home Secretary are in continuing negotiations, to ensure that there is no change to that position. I guarantee that we want to see EU nationals continue to work in and contribute to our great health service.

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): I welcome the interim NHS people plan. Workforce is the greatest challenge across all four health services, but the 41,000 nursing vacancies in NHS England are simply a patient safety issue and cannot be parked on some shelf or kicked into the long grass. The plan identifies the removal of the nursing bursary and the imposition of student fees leading to a drop of over 30% in new student nurses. Will the Minister confirm that re-establishing the bursary? Scotland preserved the bursary and free tuition, and our nursing vacancy rate is less than half that. The plan also calls for 5,000 new GPs. I remember the former Secretary of State promising 5,000 new GPs by next year, and rather than being close to delivering that, there are 1,000 fewer. How will the Minister deliver 5,000 extra GPs? Will he increase funding to Health Education England to deliver it?

There is no question but that the NHS across the UK will need non-UK staff. How will the Minister attract both EU and non-EU staff when there has been a 90% drop in European nurses coming here, and non-EU doctors are leaving because of visa charges and the £400 a year they pay per member of their family to access NHS services? What is he going to do about the pension tax allowance rules that are driving young consultants out of the NHS?

Stephen Hammond: I thank the hon. Lady for welcoming the plan. I think she will accept that this is a good interim plan; it is a stepping stone. She asks what we are doing to fill nursing places. I point out yet again that we are increasing applications and ensuring that there are 5,000 extra clinical placements available, which is a 25% increase on last year. Far from being complacent about the number of nursing applicants, we are looking to ensure that more nurses can be trained in this country, beyond the 35,000 who are being trained at the moment.

The hon. Lady asked about doctors. The Royal College of Physicians has made it clear that we need more medical school students. We are committed to increasing the number of undergraduate medical school places for domestic students by 1,500, with the first 630 being taken up last year. By 2020, there will be five new medical schools across England, helping to deliver—[Interruption.] Of course it takes time, but if we do not take that step now, we will never make the end of that journey. That has been a consistent problem for many
years. There are still more doctors coming through now, but we need to do more, which is why this plan is being put in place.

The hon. Lady will have heard me say to my right hon. and learned Friend the Father of the House that there are more than 63,000 EU nationals working in the health service. That is more than there were in December 2017, and over 5,000 more than there were in June 2016. She is right to point out that we want those skills in the right clinical areas. I reiterate what I said a moment ago: we wish to make it absolutely clear that the contribution of EU nationals working in the health service is extraordinary and valued and will continue to be so. The hon. Lady briefly mentioned pensions. She will have noted that we launched a consultation yesterday, setting out some ideas. I am pleased to say that the British Medical Association has welcomed them but asked us to look at other flexibility within the pension rules. I encourage the hon. Lady and all consultants to take part in that consultation.

Steve Brine (Winchester) (Con): The Minister knows from our time together in the Department how much I welcome the interim people plan. It simply is the turnkey without which our long-term plan just cannot work. He is aware of how important retention is, and that is at the heart of the plan. I know he has mentioned this several times already—and consultations are great, and I will encourage my constituents to take part—but may I ask him to look urgently at the changes to the NHS pension scheme in relation to the annual allowance and the lifetime allowance? My trust has contacted me to say that senior consultant doctors and senior nurses are receiving unexpected tax bills of tens of thousands of pounds—up to £50,000—which is starting to have an impact on decisions about their future and the additional sessional work they are prepared to take up. This is impacting on patient care now, so on behalf of my constituents, I urge him—I know he will take this seriously—to look urgently at the NHS pension scheme issue.

Stephen Hammond: Again, my hon. Friend was absolutely right at the start of his question to point out that this is a key stepping stone to making sure that the long-term plan works. He is also absolutely right to point out that we recognise and have taken extraordinarily seriously the difficulties that a number of clinicians have had with the pension tax changes. He will know from his time in the Department that we have been in continuous discussions with the Treasury about what options may be available. I have set out today that the consultation will propose a new 50:50 option for higher-earning clinicians to halve the rate of pension growth in exchange for halving contributions. I accept that this is only one part of the solution, but it is a step forward. I welcome contributions to the consultation, and I urge him and his consultants to take part.

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): In our area, GP practices have had serious problems recruiting, and one constituent has contacted me about surgeries being cancelled and having been told that the next routine appointment, for what is actually a serious condition, will be in August. My constituents cannot wait that long for GP appointments. Frankly, Ministers have had nine years to anticipate this crisis, and instead of making things better, they have in fact made things worse, with the King’s Fund warning that GP shortages could treble in the next five years. Frankly, the warm words the Minister has said are not urgent enough and not substantial enough to turn this around, so what is he going to do in the next six months to make a difference to my constituents, who are waiting far too long for important appointments?

Stephen Hammond: The right hon. Lady is right to be angry because her constituents should not be waiting that long. If she wishes to speak to me afterwards, I will take that up directly, with her, on behalf of her constituents.

The right hon. Lady says that we are not taking this seriously and not acting urgently enough. She will know that this interim people plan makes sure we will have not only more people recruited to the NHS, but more people wishing to stay working within the NHS. One of the key issues the NHS has faced is that a lot of people have decided not to work within it, and the key part of the people plan—this being the interim before the final is published later—is actually about ensuring we have more staff there. I reject what the right hon. Lady says. We are taking this seriously, and we are acting on it now.

Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): I welcome the record amounts of investment going into the NHS, but may I seek assurances from the Minister that we will be using those resources to ensure that specialist clinicians in areas such as blood cancer and heart disease are properly supported so that we have the training for those personnel to tackle those conditions in particular? I say that as the chairman of the all-party groups on both conditions.

Stephen Hammond: My hon. Friend will know, because I have been in debates with him before, that I recognise the exceptional work that those two all-party groups do. He will know from the long-term plan that we have set out new commitments on diagnosis for all cancers and for cardiac. He will know that the reason why we have set out an interim people plan and will then set out a final people plan is that a long-term plan cannot work unless we have the people to back it up and are training the right number of people. This plan sets out how to recruit more people, how to train more people, how to give people the skills to deal with what will face the clinicians and the physicians of the 21st century, and that is key to delivering what he has asked for.

Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab): Baroness Harding, who is a Conservative peer, and Sir David Behan, the head of Health Education England, told the Health Committee yesterday in absolutely clear terms that both the abolition of nursing bursaries and Brexit are seriously exacerbating the staffing crisis in the NHS. Are they wrong?

Stephen Hammond: I am sure they will also have said that one of the things Health Education England has explicitly set out is that one of the biggest barriers to more nurses was that there was not the placement capacity. I am sure Sir David Behan will also have set
out that he therefore welcomes entirely the 5,000 extra clinical placements that are being made available, which is a 25% increase on last year.

The right hon. Gentleman will also know, as I have set out, that there are more EU nationals working in the NHS now than there were at the time of the referendum. However, one of the reasons why we are having an interim people plan is that we are not complacent. There are huge challenges, as I set out not only in my written ministerial statement, but in my opening remarks. That is why this plan is addressing the shortages in nursing, and it is right that we do so.

*Lucy Allan* (Telford) (Con): I welcome very much this initiative, and I am delighted by all that has been said. The chief executive officer of Shrewsbury and Telford Hospital announced his departure on Monday, following a catalogue of failings. Despite these failings, formal complaints to Dido Harding and others and a series of calls for his dismissal, the CEO has apparently resigned of his own volition to take up another highly paid job within the NHS and is not going to work his notice because he has too much holiday to take. Does the Minister agree that senior management in any organisation, including the NHS, must be held to account for their performance, and will the people plan deliver this?

*Stephen Hammond*: My hon. Friend makes a very powerful statement on behalf of her constituents about the change of leadership. I am obviously aware of the change of leadership, including the departure of the chief executive, and I am aware that it raises a number of issues, which she and I may wish to have a meeting to discuss. She is right to ask whether we are tackling the culture to make sure that we have the best leaders in the NHS, whether we are ensuring that they are properly trained for the challenges of the 21st century and whether we are making sure that they are not only held accountable but supported to make sure they are doing the best they can. That is why Sir David Behan led a chapter in the whole draft people plan, which will lead into the final people plan, on leadership. The right leadership for the NHS will make sure that our constituents get better care.

*Ellie Reeves* (Lewisham West and Penge) (Lab): It has been reported this week that there has been a dramatic rise in self-harm, with one in five girls cutting, burning or poisoning themselves. Despite this, the NHS trust in my constituency has cut the Lewisham child and adolescent mental health services budget, due to central Government cuts. We desperately need more funding and more staff. Given that the Government are not on track to meet their mental health workforce target for 2020-21, is the Minister really confident that we can meet these new, larger recruitment targets?

*Stephen Hammond*: I am confident that we are putting in place the measures that will allow those targets to be met. There is a comprehensive expansion of mental health services, with an additional £2.3 billion being invested over the next four years, which will make sure we resolve the problems the hon. Lady has highlighted. In particular, 350,000 more children will get the support they need, which I am sure will translate into dealing with the issues at local level that she has raised.

*James Cartlidge* (South Suffolk) (Con): GP retention is a significant challenge in my constituency, and GPs do often raise the impact of the current pension system. May I say to my hon. Friend that I very much welcome the consultation on pension arrangements for clinicians, but can he set out the potential timing of when those changes may come into force? He will be aware that GPs are making decisions right now about things such as early retirement, and we need this as a matter of urgency.

*Stephen Hammond*: I thank my hon. Friend for that question. The Department will launch the consultation at the end of this month. It will set out the proposals, which we spoke about yesterday, to introduce greater pension flexibility. They are designed to take away the disincentives not only for senior clinicians but clearly for GPs. That consultation will last for the normal length of time, and I hope we will be able to proceed quickly thereafter.

*Ann Clwyd* (Cynon Valley) (Lab): When I came to Parliament 35 years ago, I had served for three years on the royal commission on the NHS. We made many recommendations. When I hear the Minister talk about things that will be done and say that notice has been taken of reports, I am reminded that that report landed on Margaret Thatcher’s desk. The recommendations that we made were never carried out. One was about the shortage of doctors. Thirty-five years ago, we knew that there would be a shortage of doctors. We made many other important points, which should have been acted on. What assurances can the Minister give so that on this occasion the recommendations in the report will be acted on? What is the point of all these words and all this work done by people on things such as royal commissions unless the Government take action?

*Stephen Hammond*: The Government are taking action specifically on the points that the right hon. Lady made. We committed to increase the number of undergraduate medical school places by 1,500, and 630 are already in place.

*Paul Masterton* (East Renfrewshire) (Con): I thank the Minister for grappling with the NHS pension scheme issue. I am not convinced that the 50:50 option is a long-term, sustainable option, so will he confirm, as the Secretary of State said yesterday, that the consultation will be open to exploring other mechanisms? In particular, will he keep banging at the Treasury’s door, because the ultimate solution is in its power? The way in which it has tried to dodge this and pass it to the Department of Health and Social Care is a bit of disgrace.

*Stephen Hammond*: My right hon. Friend—I am sorry, my hon. Friend. I am only presaging something that will happen in future—will know that when my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State speaks he says what he means. The consultation will be open to looking at other schemes and other potential flexibility. My hon. Friend will know that the British Medical Association has welcomed the 50:50 option but would like to see other options. He will also know, much as the Department might like to make tax policy, we do not do so, so it
would be injudicious of me to commit, but I am happy to continue our long-standing conversations with the Treasury on this matter.

Dr Rosena Allin-Khan (Tooting) (Lab): There will be no people plan if Donald Trump gets his hands on our NHS. Unlike Donald Trump, the NHS does not discriminate, and staff value everyone who walks through the door as equal. Does the Minister agree that the NHS was not for sale yesterday, it is not for sale today, and it must not be for sale tomorrow?

Stephen Hammond: The good news is that I think the hon. Lady was agreeing with my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State, who set that out yesterday. I welcome the fact that she supports him.

Steve Double (St Austell and Newquay) (Con): The fishing village of Mevagissey risks losing its GP surgery because the last remaining doctor there has handed the contract back to the NHS. The people of Mevagissey have launched an incredible campaign to find a new GP for their village. Does the Minister support their campaign, and will he spread the message far and wide that there is an amazing community waiting for a new GP and that all expressions of interest are welcome? Can he reassure me that the new people plan contains measures not only to recruit more doctors but to ensure that rural and coastal communities can find the GPs they desperately need?

Stephen Hammond: My hon. Friend is right, and I am happy to support the campaign by the people of Mevagissey, which is a wonderful part of the country to live in. I am happy, too, to assist him in that campaign if he wishes to come and speak to me about it. He is right that the plan sets out ways to recruit and retain more doctors, including GPs in rural and coastal locations, as well as those in urban locations.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): Would the Minister join me, first, in congratulating the Royal College of Nursing on backing a people’s vote? Does he accept that one reason for that was doubtless that the number of nurses and midwives from the EU has dropped by 5,000 in the past two years? Will he set out what extra cost and complexity will be associated with the recruitment of nurses and midwives from the European Union, if indeed we leave the EU, in future?

Stephen Hammond: I join the hon. Lady in congratulating the RCN—

Tom Brake: The hon. Lady?

Stephen Hammond: I am sorry, I wholeheartedly apologise to the right hon. Gentleman. I certainly join him in welcoming the RCN’s welcome for a people plan. It is a great and sensible step forward, without being complacent about what needs to be done in the next phase, which will be published later in the year. He will know that we have been working with other EU members to ensure that, after what I hope is an orderly Brexit, there is continued recognition of medical qualifications. He will know that the European Commission has already set out its desire for a wide-ranging, extensive reciprocal healthcare agreement, and the Government continue to work to achieve that ambition.

Dr Paul Williams (Stockton South) (Lab): I do not think that the Minister is taking this seriously. In the past two years, 5,000 nurses and midwives from EU countries have left the NHS, at a time when we are 40,000 nurses short. Does he agree with David Behan, the chair of Health Education England, who agreed yesterday that Brexit is exacerbating the NHS staffing crisis?

Stephen Hammond: I have already set out the fact that the Department, the whole NHS management, the whole NHS, and we as a country welcome and recognise the huge contribution of EU nationals in the NHS. I have set out our desire to continue to ensure that EU nationals work in the NHS. Alongside that, I know that Sir David Behan will have also said to the hon. Gentleman that it is important that we have more routes into nursing to ensure that those 40,000 vacancies that he discussed do not continue, which is why we have set out in the plan more nursing apprenticeships, more nursing associates and more clinical placements. It is important to have both international and domestic recruitment.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): The Minister has talked a lot about leadership. He said in his opening statement that there was a need to create in the NHS leaders who could create cultures that empowered staff. What is he going to do about the bullying at the top of the NHS, including in NHS England and NHS Improvement, which Dido Harding admitted yesterday at the Health Committee?

Stephen Hammond: The hon. Lady is right: that culture is not acceptable and must be driven out. She will have read the interim people plan, which talks explicitly about ensuring that we create leadership that stops that culture. There is a chapter on making the NHS the best place to work. She will know that we have been working across the country to ensure that all staff know that they are valued, that they have the right to speak up and that the culture of bullying must be driven out. I shall speak with Baroness Harding, as I do regularly, to ensure that that message is spread throughout the NHS and that staff know that they are valued.

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): I realise that health is devolved to the Scottish Government. Nevertheless it has to be said that the Scottish Government are having enormous trouble with their workforce planning, which means that doctors and nurses have to pick up the slack and that we are wasting good money on employing agency staff, which need not happen. May I make a plea to Her Majesty’s Government to share workforce planning and best practice with the Scottish Government so that they can get that right?

Stephen Hammond: As the hon. Gentleman rightly pointed out, health matters in Scotland are devolved, but I am delighted to share any of the excellent initiatives that are set out in the draft people plan with the Scottish Government.
Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): Despite the vital role played by carers in society, they merit just a paragraph in the plan. Will the Minister ensure that his Department matches Labour’s commitment to publish a full strategy for carers and to increase carer’s allowance to the same rate as jobseeker’s allowance?

Stephen Hammond: I welcome Labour’s commitment to publish a paper, but the hon. Lady will know that the Department is going to publish a Green Paper on adult social care. We are finalising that. /Interjection./ The hon. Member for Leicester South (Jonathan Ashworth) shouts at me. I know he makes a lot of promises without detail. We want to make promises that have detail and can work.

Grahame Morris (Easington) (Lab): This is an important report into NHS people planning. It is an interim report, so there is an opportunity to identify any deficiencies. My particular concern is about the cancer workforce, in particular the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Leicester South about the loss of bursaries not just for nurses but for therapeutic radiographers. May I draw the attention of the Minister, with due respect, to the fact that the radiotherapy and oncology course at Portsmouth University recently closed? Concerns are being expressed and not just by politicians on the Opposition Benches. Mr Richard Evans, chief executive of the Society of Radiographers, said that he has concerns about whether our hospitals and specialist cancer centres will be able to recruit enough skilled and trained personnel. This could even threaten the delivery of cancer treatment and the ambitious plans that the Minister has in the new cancer strategy.

Stephen Hammond: The hon. Gentleman is right: this is a serious plan. As he rightly points out, it is an interim plan. It sets out a number of specific actions for this year. It also sets out a number of clear action paths and trajectories to ensure that the people plan is achieved. I would be delighted to meet him and other officers of the all-party group to ensure that we get the skills in the right places to ensure that the ambitious and deliverable plans in the long-term plan can happen.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): I raised the cost of the Babylon GP at Hand app and the cuts in the number of conventional GPs at Prime Minister’s questions but, with respect to the Minister for the Cabinet Office, he missed the point, astonishingly. Even if NHS England funds £21 million of the shortfall for this year, that is still money from the public purse and it does not address the past cost to Hammersmith and Fulham of at least £12 million or any future costs. Will the Government suspend the Babylon contract while there is a proper investigation into this privatisation of the NHS?

Stephen Hammond: It is not a privatisation of the NHS; it is a scheme allowing greater access to GP services. The hon. Gentleman will know that it is delivering healthcare to a number of his constituents as well.

Sure Start: IFS Report

1.32 pm

Lucy Powell (Manchester Central) (Lab/Co-op) (Urgent question): Thank you, Mr Speaker, for granting this urgent question. To ask the Secretary of State to make a statement on the Institute for Fiscal Studies report on Sure Start children’s centres.

The Minister for Apprenticeships and Skills (Anne Milton): The Government very much welcome the recent report by the Institute for Fiscal Studies on the effects of Sure Start. It is crucial that, in our pursuit of better outcomes for children and families and in making spending decisions, we are guided by high-quality evidence. The report gives us more of that.

The report shows very clearly that children in disadvantaged areas benefit most from services. Indeed, those in the richest 30% of neighbourhoods saw practically no impact at all. The policy framework we have in place reflects that evidence. In 2013, the Government introduced a new core purpose for children’s centres, focusing on families in the greatest need of support. While we have seen local authorities remodel services, there are now more children’s centres than at any other time prior to 2008—in fact, since Tony Blair was Prime Minister. This is at a time when the Government are making record investment in childcare, with more than 700,000 of the most disadvantaged two-year-olds having benefited from 15 hours’ free childcare since its introduction in 2013. In addition, under the Government’s healthy child programme, children and families now receive five mandatory health visitor checks in the early years. The statutory framework also contains important protections so that outcomes for children and families, particularly the most disadvantaged, will not be adversely affected by the proposed changes to children’s centre provision.

The IFS concludes that policy makers must “consider which types of services and models of provision can most effectively help this group”. The Government agree. Indeed, we already have work under way to do exactly that. As part of our £8.5 million early years local government programme, we announced in April that the Early Intervention Foundation will look at children’s centres and other delivery models to find out what works well, so that local authorities have more evidence to help them to continue to make the best decisions for their communities.

Lucy Powell: I thank the Minister for her reply, but I think it bears little relation to reality.

Sure Start is a proud Labour legacy. It has a proven track record of transforming lives, yet it has been allowed to wither on the vine by this Government. The Institute for Fiscal Studies, in its significant report yesterday, highlighted that austerity has hit Sure Start hard, with budgets falling by two thirds. We have seen over 1,000 centres close since 2010. The report also shows that Sure Start saved the NHS millions of pounds by significantly reducing hospitalisation of children, especially those from the most disadvantaged backgrounds. There is a clear lesson here for Government: investment in early intervention saves money later on. Closing Sure Start centres is a false economy.
Sure Start: IFS Report

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Sure Start: IFS Report

Lucy Powell]

Will the Minister use the report as ammunition, with the Tory leadership contenders and the Treasury ahead of the spending review, for a new commitment to revitalise Sure Start? What is happening to the Government’s review on the first 1,001 critical days, which was led by the former Leader of the House, the right hon. Member for South Northamptonshire (Andrea Leadsom)? I pay tribute to her work and her focus on this issue. Will the review be published before we get a new Prime Minister—I understand that it was ready to go—and will renewing Sure Start be central to its recommendations? Will the Government match Labour’s commitment to save Sure Start and invest £500 million in resurrecting it? Given the clear benefits of children’s centres in creating social mobility, will she properly fund local authorities so that they can do everything possible to keep children’s centres open?

The decimation of Sure Start has been a travesty. It flies in the face of all the evidence that early intervention is key to tackling disadvantage. It must be reversed.

Anne Milton: I pay tribute to the hon. Lady. This has been a passion of hers and she has worked very hard across the House to gain support. She is absolutely right that investment in early intervention is important. I should point out that, in the first paragraph of the executive summary, the report makes it clear that “the UK is now one of the highest spenders on the under-5s in Europe”.

Those are OECD figures from 2014. I would just say to her that what matters is to have a universal offer, but it is also about the way services are delivered. That is not necessarily always most effective through centres. They definitely have a role, but it is about services and making sure that we get the services to those who need them the most.

Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member for Manchester Central (Lucy Powell), a member of the Education Committee, on her urgent question. In Essex, we have an extraordinary family hub that the Children’s Minister, the Under-Secretary of State for Education, my hon. Friend the Member for Stratford-on-Avon (Nadhim Zahawi), has visited. It is a one-stop shop for mentoring, health support, education support and counselling services. Our manifesto commitment was to have family hubs across the country. Will my right hon. Friend commit to having such hubs and roll them out across the United Kingdom?

Anne Milton: I thank my right hon. Friend for his comments and congratulate Essex on its work on its family hubs. The point he makes is important. It is not just about one-stop shops; it is also about ensuring that, for families who never go near family hubs or children’s centres, we can deliver services in their own homes. On the quality of children’s centres, in 2010, 68% of early years providers were good or outstanding. Today, the figure is 95%. On outcomes, in 2013, 52% of children left reception with a good level of development. Today, 72% of children do so. It is about making sure that we get the services that are appropriate for a local area to those who need them the most.

Tracy Brabin (Batley and Spen) (Lab/Co-op): Thank you for granting this urgent question, Mr Speaker, and I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester Central (Lucy Powell) for asking it.

The IFS report showed that Sure Start reduces the hospital admissions gap between rich and poor children by half. Put simply, thousands of children are ending up in hospital because of cuts to Sure Start. Sure Start was the jewel in the crown of the Labour Government, and politicians, policy makers and the public have long understood its benefits. Even back in 2010, the Conservative party pledged to recruit 4,200 Sure Start health visitors for exactly that reason. It was a Conservative election manifesto promise, but what is the reality? A cut of two thirds in funding and over 1,000 Sure Start and children’s centres have been lost since 2010.

Will the Minister join me in welcoming the report and commit to responding in detail to each of its recommendations before the summer recess? However, it should not be the IFS that marks the Government’s homework. In 2015, the then Conservative Government promised a consultation on Sure Start, but nothing has materialised. When will that work be completed and will the Minister commit to a publication deadline today? At a time when NHS budgets are stretched, should we not be investing in preventive measures such as Sure Start to keep children from ending up in hospital? Will she make that point forcefully in the spending review?

Tory leadership candidates are scrambling over themselves to make pledges to reverse their cuts, but if they are genuinely serious about social justice, now is the time to show that by pledging to reverse the scandalous cuts they have made to Sure Start.

Anne Milton: I thank the hon. Lady for her comments. Being fixed in a dogmatic way on Sure Start children’s centres is not necessarily—[Interruption.]

Perhaps she will let me finish. It is important that anything we do is evidence-based. As the report makes clear, statistically the IFS cannot necessarily be confident that the effects that it highlighted on hospitalisation are not due to chance. We need to make sure that we get the right services in the right place, in the right setting, for the families who need them most. Public Health England is currently looking at the healthy child programme, which is 10 years old. It wants to modernise that, focusing it on the first 1,000 days, and she has been involved in that. Looking at the team around the child and at solutions to make sure that vulnerable children and families get the help they need means that we need universal reach and a targeted response where it is needed most.

Lucy Allan (Telford) (Con): I, too, pay tribute to the hon. Member for Manchester Central (Lucy Powell) for her excellent and long-standing work on early years, and I very much enjoy being a member of the Education Committee alongside her. With increasing numbers of children being taken into care, what is the Minister doing to help the most vulnerable families to stay safely together?

Anne Milton: It is important that families who can stay safely together—the critical word is “safely”—are supported to do so. A number of initiatives are going...
Anne Milton: The hon. Lady has always been a champion of early years in all the work that she has done. It is not just the budget spent on Sure Start centres that matters; it is the budget coming in, and the visits from health visitors, which are so crucial—

Anne Milton: I am going to sound very repetitive, but this needs to be evidence-based. Sure Start centres—

Anne Milton: The hon. Lady has a wealth of experience in this field. I can guarantee that our interventions will be evidence-based, which is the critical thing. She talks about cuts, but as the IFS report states, the UK is now one of the highest spenders on the under-fives in Europe, so we are spending money. What matters is making sure that we get the help to those who need it most.

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): I congratulate the hon. Member for Manchester Central (Lucy Powell) on raising this incredibly important issue. The Minister talks rightly about evidence-based decision making. The evidence shows that in recent years, there has been a 17% increase in the number of children being taken into care and that the reduction in funding for Sure Start centres is a contributory factor. Some 655,000 referrals to children’s services—

Anne Milton: I point out to the hon. Gentleman that correlation and causation are not the same thing. The IFS report, which we have very much welcomed, is cautious in making that distinction. The important thing is that we can build children’s Sure Start centres in his constituency, which, as he says, is very rural, but what has always mattered to me—I am a former Public Health Minister—is this: what about the families who do not go there?

Mrs Sharon Hodgson (Washington and Sunderland West) (Lab): On the eve of the election in 2010, David Cameron, who became Prime Minister, promised that Sure Start would be safe in his hands, yet here we are nine years later and over 1,000 Sure Start centres have closed, the rest have been hollowed out and two thirds of the budget has gone, and still the IFS has said that they are doing some powerful work with the poorest in our communities. Like me, does the Minister wonder what amazing achievements there could have been from these centres if they had not been decimated and savagely cut in the way that they were?

Anne Milton: The hon. Lady is shaking her head. It is not just that budget. As the report makes clear, we are the highest spender in Europe. What matters is the universal offer and making sure that we target the support to those who need it most and possibly to families who are not attending the centres—what about them?

Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): I invite the Minister to come to my constituency and see the communities that were being served by the five Sure Starts that were closed. She can see whether they were the best off in the country—I think she will find that they were not. Surely she understands that there is a connection between those closures and the 30% increase in the number of children going into care in County Durham.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): I have some sympathy for the Minister, only because the evidence she is not looking at is the evidence she can do little about—the fact that the dramatic cuts from the Treasury to these services and to local authorities have resulted in many local authorities, very reluctantly, having to close children’s services. She says she does not think the model works, but the evidence shows that investment in early years is the best investment we can make. Without it, we have to make good the damage later on. I suggest that she ask parents whether they are satisfied with the present level of support. The evidence suggests that they will say no.

Anne Milton: The hon. Gentleman is a doughty champion of all things to do with education. As the Minister responsible for post-16 education not at university, I see the results of children having suffered from poor educational backgrounds and possibly insufficient family support. He mentioned the word “model”. That is the key. It is not one model we need to reach the most vulnerable families. I point again to the 700,000 of the most disadvantaged two-year-olds who have benefited from the entitlement to 15 hours free early-years education
a week. This is an important addition to what else is being done. There is no one model that works in this area.

Ellie Reeves (Lewisham West and Penge) (Lab): When I held a summit on parental loneliness in my constituency, the local children’s centres made clear the vital role they played in supporting local families—often some of the most vulnerable. Despite this, 12 of the Sure Start centres in Bromley have closed since 2010. The Minister talks about universal reach, but with only six centres left in the entire Borough of Bromley—a huge London borough—and with our health visiting services cut, does she not recognise that universal reach is impossible without significant investment and an end to austerity?

Anne Milton: I can only refer the hon. Lady to the report that states that we are the highest-spending nation in the OECD. It is very easy for Opposition Members to throw the word “austerity” around without looking at the evidence or the other models available. She is fixated on a centre. What about the families and mothers who are too depressed to go there? I am saying we need good—[Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order.

Anne Milton: We need a variety of models of care and we will be led by the evidence.

Karin Smyth (Bristol South) (Lab): This is becoming a very frustrating exchange. On the one hand, the Minister, who I respect greatly and work with and who we know cares, is saying that this is about families in the greatest need, but on the other hand, she is saying, “What about the families who don’t go there?” My experience in Bristol stems from when this started. I was brought in to help join up the provision on education, early years and health services. They did not work well together, so we supported measures to tackle health inequalities—measures on family things such as parenting, mental health, domestic violence, cooking, nutrition and so on. We did that through outreach to the families who would not normally come and by supporting families in the greatest need. What we are losing now is that universality principle and the point about how it actually works—that is where the evidence is. This is a frustrating exchange because the evidence is there. If she can tell us what the Government seek to replace the model with and help us to understand those outcomes, perhaps we can have a more productive exchange for the benefit of all those families who need this provision.

Anne Milton: I agree 100% with the hon. Lady. In some ways, these discussions should be more consensual given that we all want the same ends. I must repeat that no silver bullet answers the question we all want answered by ensuring both sufficient universal support and a targeted approach.

Dr Roberta Blackman-Woods (City of Durham) (Lab): Since 2012, all five Sure Start centres in my constituency, serving the most disadvantaged areas, have closed, with devastating impacts on early years interventions in those areas. The Minister needs to visit Durham to understand that Sure Start’s multi-agency approach and access to a wide range of services has not been replaced by other services largely because of cuts to local authorities. Will she commit to coming to Durham, will she carry out a complete review of early years provision and children’s services and ensure it is funded properly, and will she agree to ring-fence money for Sure Start?

Anne Milton: I thank the hon. Lady for her invitation. I am not the Minister responsible for this policy area, but I will make sure that her invitation is passed to the Minister who is responsible, and I am sure that at the earliest possible opportunity he will come to Durham to see the evidence on the ground. As she said, one needs to see what it has been replaced with. I am not sure what the provision of the free childcare entitlement for two-year-olds is like in her area, but it will be important to look at that as well to see what benefit it is giving to families who might otherwise have gone to the children’s centre.

Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): I remember a conversation with a constituent who said her Sure Start centre literally saved her life. She was suffering from post-natal depression but she went to the centre and spoke to other mums and dads, and it was they who
Anne Milton: The right hon. Lady raises an important issue—she is the first to have specifically raised it—and that is maternal mental health, which is a significant problem for many and is not limited to those from disadvantaged areas. I think that is important. Paternal mental health is now getting slightly more attention than previously. I cannot comment on Kirklees specifically, but if there is any information that we can send her, I will make sure she receives it.

Mr Speaker: With typical generosity, the Minister has elevated the hon. Member for Dewsbury (Paula Sherriff) to membership of the Privy Council. As far as I can discern or guess, it can only be a matter of time.

Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): One of the great successes of Sure Start was that it reached out to rural areas. We saw that particularly in Dursley and the Top of Town in Stroud. The problem with the cuts is that they have come along with other cuts in, for instance, the number of health visitors. All the increases that were put in place by the Government post-2010 have gone. We also see all sorts of problems in the private and voluntary sectors. Will the Minister agree at least to look at the impact on rural areas? There may not be great areas of deprivation, but to people in those areas who are suffering as a result of deprivation, this matters just as much.

Anne Milton: Perhaps, Mr Speaker, that was because I believe that all women should be Privy Counsellors. They are very under-represented on the Privy Council.

The hon. Gentleman raises an important point about rurality. As I said at the outset—and I did not make the comment flippantly—we will ensure that all that we do is evidence-based, and that our evidence is robust.

Vicky Foxcroft (Lewisham, Deptford) (Lab): Has the Minister any plans to look into the impact of centres providing early-years support on reducing youth violence? I ask because last year the cross-party Youth Violence Commission published a report that, as well as suggesting that we should take a public health approach to tackling youth violence, said that early childhood centres should be revitalised.

The Minister refers to the need for evidence. Our report was written in partnership with Warwick University, and a great many academics gave evidence, including a representative of the Open University. Edward Melhuish is one of the leading academics analysing the impacts of Sure Start and early childhood centres. Will the Minister agree to read our report and respond to it, and will she also look into the material published by Edward Melhuish on Sure Start and early childhood centres?

Anne Milton: The hon. Lady rightly raises the issue of youth violence, which is behind much of the work done by Members on the first 1,000 years. [HON. MEMBERS: “1,000 days.”] I mean 1,000 days. “The First 1,000 days of life” is based on the premise that many life chances are set in those early years. I think that both the Department of Health’s healthy child programme and our Secretary of State’s focus on improving home learning, particularly family learning, are important. However, I shall be delighted to look at Edward Melhuish’s report when I am able to do so.

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): I was Hounslow’s Cabinet lead for children and young people when the Tories, who were in opposition in this place, shifted their view and came round to fully supporting the Labour Government’s roll-out of universal Sure Start provision as a multi-agency service. They did so because of the vast body of credible evidence of the real benefits provided by fully funded Sure Start centres, not just in health and mental health—which are covered in the IFS’s report—but in, for instance, social mobility, educational outcomes, and the provision of domestic violence services. Where is the evidence that informs the Government’s change of policy, as a result of which Sure Start centres are withering on the vine—or is the Minister struggling to justify it in the light of the effects of Government austerity on her Department?

Anne Milton: No. Let me remind the hon. Lady that the report makes it clear that we are one of the highest spenders on early years—[Interruption.] It is in the report, on the first paragraph of the executive summary. I can only reiterate that, while words like “austerity” can be thrown around, this is about the money we are putting into, for example, the free childcare entitlement. It all matters. It all goes towards giving young families and children the early years support they need.

Anneliese Dodds (Oxford East) (Lab/Co-op): With all due respect to the Minister, she has misrepresented the research, which showed that universal, multi-functional services—not residualised services—had a positive relationship with outcomes for disadvantaged children. In my city of Oxford, children’s centres are anything but. They are just shells for private or voluntary services, or for residualised services such as contact centres or social services. The access is not there.

The Minister keeps talking about health visitors. Is she aware that under her Government the proportion of children receiving those visits at the right time is appallingly low in many parts of the country? Is she aware that it has fallen under her Government?

Anne Milton: The hon. Lady refers to universal, multi-functional services, and to health visitors. There are five statutory health visits. Well over 90% of contacts are made with children in the first few months of their lives, and 80% are made with those aged between two and two and a half. I think that that is welcome, but we always need to know what underlies such figures. I know that Public Health England is looking at the healthy child programme, and I am sure that it will look at those figures as well.
Points of Order

2.6 pm

Rebecca Long Bailey (Salford and Eccles) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Earlier today, the Minister for the Cabinet Office may have accidentally said, in response to a question about the UK’s carbon budgets, “We are not off track” to meeting those targets at all. The Government’s official adviser on climate change, the Committee on Climate Change, has reported that the UK is off track to meeting its fourth and fifth carbon budgets, and official statistics published by the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy have also shown that it is off track. It is therefore a matter of established fact that the UK is off track to meeting its targets. Can you advise me, Mr Speaker, on how we can correct the record?

Mr Speaker: I think that the hon. Lady has done so very successfully, not least to her own satisfaction. The observation that she has just made will be faithfully recorded in the Official Report, which she may choose to disseminate more widely, possibly in her own constituency or beyond. I hope that she will go about her business with an additional glint in her eye and spring in her step in the knowledge that she has taken early action to put the record straight, as she sees it.

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): On a point of order, Mr Speaker, of which I have given notice both to you and to the hon. Member for East Dunbartonshire (Jo Swinson).

Last week, on the BBC’s “Question Time” programme, the hon. Member for East Dunbartonshire said that 80% of school leavers in Bearsden, in her constituency, went to university, and claimed that only 4% of school leavers in Govan did so. That has caused much consternation and offence in Govan, and it has been discussed by various organisations there, including Govan Community Council. As you would expect, Mr Speaker, I have written to the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation, which has advised me that the “statistics quoted on Question Time relate to the Govan and Linthouse intermediate zone and are based on one of the indicators used for multiple deprivation...These statistics are different from the school leaver destination statistics for the following reasons...the proportion is based on the overall 17-21 population (not just school leavers)...they relate to entries into a first degree course only...the time periods are different”.

As I have said, Mr Speaker, offence and consternation have been caused. Can you advise me first on how the statistics can be corrected, secondly on how we can ensure a more respectable debate on school leaver destinations, and finally on how the House can receive an apology from the hon. Member for East Dunbartonshire for causing such offence to the people of Govan?

Mr Speaker: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving me notice that he wished to raise this matter. I cannot say that it satisfies the criterion for a point of order, although it is not in a small minority in that respect, in terms of what purport to be points of order. Moreover, I am grateful to him for confirming that he has informed the hon. Member for East Dunbartonshire of his intention to raise the matter: that is especially important in view of the charge he has levelled against her.

As I think the hon. Gentleman knows and as I have just said, that was not a point of order. I have no responsibilities for the accuracy or otherwise of what may have been said on a television programme, even one so notably august as the BBC’s “Question Time”, by a Member of this House. I did see “Question Time” last week, although I do not recall the particular use of statistics upon which the hon. Gentleman quite understandably focused his beady eye.

In response to the hon. Gentleman’s inquiry about how he could achieve redress, let me say that I think that by raising the issue he has found his own salvation, and in the process, perhaps, that of the people of Govan, with whom he may wish to communicate further on this matter. It is not for me to plunge into an internecine conflict between colleagues. All that I will say, as far as the hon. Member for East Dunbartonshire is concerned, is that in the 14 years for which I have known her I have always regarded her as a person of absolutely unfailing personal courtesy. We will leave it there for now.

BILL PRESENTED

VEHICLE EMISSIONS (IDLING PENALTIES) BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Wera Hobhouse presented a Bill to increase penalties for stationary vehicle idling offences, to grant local authorities increased powers to issue such penalties, and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time tomorrow, and to be printed (Bill 395).
The Government have spoken at length about legislating to give freeholders the same rights as leaseholders when it comes to service charges. I quote from one of their letters I received from the Minster for housing and homelessness, the hon. Member for South Derbyshire (Mrs Wheeler), regarding this issue:

“I believe very strongly that service charges should be transparent, communicated effectively and that there should be a clear route to redress or challenge if things go wrong.”

I want to be clear: the management charges to which this Bill pertains apply to freeholders and are distinct from services charges. I am asking that the fees related to estate management schemes are not forgotten. It is clear to me that currently the balance of power is neither fair nor appropriate. Management companies can, by law, use enforcement agents to collect the management charges but individual dwelling freeholders are unable even to obtain details of where the money they have been charged goes or has gone.

I thank the Calthorpe Residents Society for its work on this. These residents, and others around the country who face similar predicaments as a result of their management schemes, have made repeated representations to their landlords asking for an account of the expenditure to see how the management fee that they pay is being spent. To date, no accounts have been made available for the Calthorpe residents. This means residents have no way of knowing how their annual fees are being spent by the landlords or scheme managers in maintaining a high quality across the estate. Residents who own their own homes as freeholders are left feeling helpless as they try to find out how much is left in the scheme, and they are rightly aggrieved that, despite their payment into the said fund, the opaqueness of it makes them powerless to try to enforce the responsibilities of the landlord or management scheme manager.

Today I ask the Government to strengthen the legal position of all freeholders to ensure that they have the right to know how the money that they must pay to the landlord or scheme manager under section 19 of the Leasehold Reform Act 1967 is being spent.

Question put and agreed to.
Ordered.

That Preet Kaur Gill, Jack Dromey, Kate Osamor, Helen Goodman, Jo Platt, Maria Caulfield, Ruth George, Caroline Lucas, Mr Virendra Sharma, Jeremy Lefroy, Huw Merriman and Kevin Hollinrake present the Bill.

Preet Kaur Gill accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time tomorrow, and to be printed (Bill 396).
Rehabilitation of Offenders

2.17 pm

The Minister of State, Ministry of Justice (Robert Buckland): I beg to move.

That the draft Rehabilitation of Offenders Act (Exceptions) Order 1975 (Amendment) (England and Wales) Order 2019, which was laid before this House on 1 April, be approved.

The purpose of this draft instrument is to include inquiries established under the Inquiries Act 2005 as “excepted proceedings” in the Rehabilitation of Offenders Act 1974 (Exceptions) Order 1975. That will enable those types of inquiry to consider the spent convictions of individuals. This legislative change was requested initially by Sir John Mitting, chair of the undercover policing inquiry, and I will pause now to pay tribute to his predecessor as chair, the late Sir Christopher Pritchard. Sir Christopher was a distinguished member of the Bar, a High Court judge and Lord Justice of Appeal, who sadly died in the middle of this inquiry. He is much missed by all of us who knew and respected him as an outstanding lawyer of his generation.

Sir John stepped into the breach and is conducting this lengthy and serious inquiry. The reason for the request he has made is that information on individuals’ spent convictions is important for the purposes of the terms of reference of the inquiry.

The inquiry is examining undercover police operations conducted by English and Welsh police forces from 1968 onwards, including whether the police were justified in launching undercover operations against a group. To give full consideration to this, the inquiry needs to be able to consider the convictions of members of the groups; however, given the historical nature of the inquiry, many of these convictions will be spent, and therefore not disclosable under the Rehabilitation of Offenders Act 1974.

The statutory instrument will give Sir John’s inquiry the ability to consider spent convictions. The change is vital for the inquiry to successfully fulfil its remit, and hon. Members will be aware that there is a high and appropriate level of public interest in this inquiry. Although the undercover policing inquiry is a particularly clear case of an inquiry where spent convictions are relevant, the amendment will allow any inquiry under the Inquiries Act 2005 to admit evidence of spent convictions and cautions, but—this is important—limited only to where that is necessary to fulfil the terms of reference of that inquiry. It is likely that other inquiries may in future need to consider spent criminal records.

Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): I am grateful to the Minister for giving way, and I appreciate his reassurance that the test is of necessity. Can he assure me that the same approach is intended to be taken by the chairman of the inquiry, as, for example, will be taken by a judge in determining the test of necessity and also relevance to the topic matter of an inquiry? Relevance is the normal test in court. Can he assure us that necessity will include that as well?

Robert Buckland: I am grateful to my hon. Friend, who is the Chair of the Justice Committee and a barrister of long standing at the criminal Bar. He is absolutely right to talk about the test of relevance. It is not the purport of any inquiry ambit or the function of any inquiry chair to adopt a floodgates approach to the disclosure and use of spent convictions. In the other place, the noble Baroness Barran put it very well when she set out to their lordships a flowchart of the way in which a particular decision about the use of spent convictions would be taken. She said:

“The first question is: does the individual have spent convictions, yes or no? If the answer is yes, are they relevant? Will they be treated anonymously? If they apply for anonymity, will that be agreed to? Further, even if it is not anonymous, is the hearing held in private or in public? If it is held in private, could the information then be published?”—[Official Report, House of Lords, 20 May 2019; Vol. 797, c. 1792.]

I thought that that was a clear exposition of the framework within which a decision maker would carry out their function when it comes to spent convictions. In other words, that is the sort of filter that I think meets the concerns not only of Members in the other place but of Members in this House.

I was talking about future inquiries, and was saying it is likely that other inquiries may need to consider spent criminal records, as these can be key to determining whether authorities have acted reasonably in assessing and responding to risk. The Rehabilitation of Offenders Act 1974 affords offenders protection from having to disclose their convictions and cautions, once those convictions and cautions have become what is termed “spent” under the Act. That is the point at which the offender has become rehabilitated. The exceptions order to that Act lists activities or categories of jobs where those protections are lifted so that offenders, if asked, need to disclose their spent convictions.

The primary rationale behind the exceptions order is that there are certain jobs—positions of public trust, for example, or those involving unsupervised work with children—where more complete or relevant disclosure of an individual’s criminal record may be appropriate to mitigate risks to public safety. The exceptions order is not limited to employment purposes, although that is its primary use. The amendment proposed here is not employment-related, but related only to the consideration of evidence of spent convictions and cautions in inquiries that are caused to be held under the Inquiries Act 2005.

David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): The Justice Committee has produced a report that recommends “banning the box”, to deal with the issue of spent convictions, and the Government gave a very positive response. There may be occasions when there is a crossover between an individual who might apply for a job in the public sector and somebody who is covered by an inquiry. I just want to get the Minister’s take on that particular point.

Robert Buckland: The right hon. Gentleman raises a very proper point, and I can assure him that the work that his Committee has done and the campaign to ban the box are matters that I and my colleagues in the Department are considering very carefully indeed. I will chart the changes that we have already made to the 1974 Act and the direction of travel later in my remarks, but I would say to him for that in the flowchart that I have outlined, the sort of concerns that he properly raises about an individual’s employment prospects could be raised in the inquiry before the Chair, when the Chair decides whether to publish the information or to retain anonymity. So there will be safeguards designed to protect against the sort of mischief that he properly probes me about.
Robert Buckland: My hon. Friend uses the word “proportionate”, and as a distinguished former Government lawyer, she knows what that means. I think many other people—Madam Deputy Speaker included—will know precisely what it means. It means, in effect, making sure that any measure does not defeat the purpose for which it was brought into force. In other words, it must not become self-defeating, and the response must be in line with the nature of the challenge. My hon. Friend is also absolutely right to talk about the wider context. We have to look at meaningful rehabilitation, and we have all seen plenty of examples of individuals who have committed offences and been punished for their crimes and who have been able to go on in later life to make a success of their work and family life and become the sort of citizens we want to see in our society. That is self-evident, and it is certainly the experience that all of us will have had at some point or other.

Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): I think the Minister is putting all our fears to rest. Paragraph 7.6 of the accompanying explanatory memorandum refers only to independent inquiries into child sexual abuse. Is that in effect what this is all about, or is it going to be wider than that? I thought that if people had signed the sex offenders register, that was already admissible evidence, so could the Minister confirm that this is not just about historical child sex abuse and tell us what the status of the sex offenders register is?

Robert Buckland: I am looking again at paragraph 7.6, and I think its purpose is to illustrate other examples of inquiries that have been set up pursuant to the Inquiries Act 2005. I will go on to explain that, because that does not cover every public inquiry. I will give the House a few examples as I develop my argument. In this case, the ongoing independent inquiry into child sexual abuse is used as an example of a 2005 Act statutory inquiry that may need to consider criminal records in the course of its deliberations. It is therefore a useful illustration of another inquiry that was set up because there was a strong public interest to be served and one would benefit from not having to undergo what would otherwise be a rather cumbersome and lengthy process of looking at the admission of evidence on a case-by-case basis.

As we know, the independent inquiry is taking considerable time, and it would be in the wider public interest for its work to be sped up in this way.

The hon. Member for Stroud (Dr Drew) talked about the register; as he knows, sex offenders are required to sign that on conviction. That public document is recorded and kept just as a conviction would be. From memory, how long an offender has to stay on the register will depend on the seriousness of the offence. Some very serious child sexual offences will, of course, rightly require life registration, so the matter will remain on public record.

The hon. Gentleman was a Member when that Act was passed; he might have a better institutional memory than mine when it comes to the debates that led up to that. My experience of it was as a practitioner and recorder, having to make sure that defendants complied with the requirement. The sex offenders register is not a court order but a statutory obligation that follows automatically on conviction.

I come back to the exceptions order, whose primary use is for employment purposes. The amendment that we are discussing is not, of course, employment related: it relates only to the consideration of evidence of spent convictions in inquiries caused to be held under the Inquiries Act 2005. Although a number of judicial proceedings are exempt from the protections of disclosure—in those proceedings, there is no restriction on considering or basing conclusions on spent conviction information—inquiries made under the 2005 Act are not currently exempt.

Examples of proceedings that are exempt include circumstances ranging from solicitor and police disciplinary proceedings, to proceedings relating to taxi driver and security licences. We feel that the work of inquiries set up under the 2005 Act is necessarily of such public interest and importance that they must have the ability to consider all the evidence relevant to their work. To extend that ability to these inquiries, we must amend the exceptions order.

The draft instrument is necessary to amend the order to enable inquiries caused to be held under the 2005 Act to admit and consider evidence of convictions and cautions that have become spent under the Rehabilitation of Offenders Act 1974, where it is necessary to fulfil the terms of reference of that inquiry; the word “relevance” again comes very much into play.

We recognise the importance of the 1974 Act, which offers vital protections to people with convictions. We improved those protections in 2014, reducing the amount of time that most people with convictions had to wait before their convictions became spent. As I mentioned in responding to the intervention made by the right hon. Member for Delyn (David Hanson), we are considering proposals for further reform to the 1974 Act following the recommendations made by various reviews in recent years, including those carried out by the Justice Committee, on which the right hon. Gentleman serves.

There are demanding criteria for inclusion on the exceptions order. Our proposed inclusion would be the first addition to the order in three years. As I said, the amendment proposed here is not about employment; it relates only to the consideration of evidence of spent convictions and cautions in judicial proceedings—namely, before inquiries caused to be held under the Inquiries Act 2005.

Understandably, their lordships raised concerns in the other place about granting all inquiries the right to consider spent convictions and the effect that would have on individual rights. I want to make it crystal clear that we have proposed to extend this power only to a limited number of inquiries; as I said, we are talking only about inquiries set up under the 2005 Act, so non-statutory inquiries, such as both the Butler and Chilcot inquiries on the Iraq war, would not be covered by this legislation.

This legislation applies only to inquiries where considering spent convictions is necessary to fulfil their terms of reference. An inquiry’s terms of reference are set by the Minister, in consultation with the chairman of the inquiry.
Robert Buckland:

That provides an element of individual consideration of whether the exception should apply to each inquiry that ensures that this will not apply indiscriminately. Frankly, considering spent convictions will not be necessary for the vast majority of inquiries. In other words, the measure already has a limited application.

Our view is that sufficient safeguards are in place to ensure that individual rights—the issue that concerned their lordships—are preserved as far as is necessary. Under section 1 of the Inquiries Act 2005, inquiries are caused to be held by a Minister when particular events have occurred, or are capable of causing, public concern, or there is public concern that particular events have occurred. As such, inquiries by design are held only where they are in the public interest, so any limited interference with an offender’s article 8 right to private life under the European convention on human rights would be necessary and proportionate.

Article 8 enshrines the right to respect for private life, but that is a qualified right. Subsection (2) provides that there shall be no interference with that right except such as is in accordance with the law and necessary in a democratic society in the interests of national security, public safety, or the economic wellbeing of the country; or else for the prevention of disorder or crime, the protection of health or morals or the protection of the rights and freedoms of others. Section 19 of the 2005 Act has specific regard to these rights, in as far as they ought be protected, but it does so in a way that enables the inquiry to fulfil its terms of reference and consider matters necessary in the public interest. In that way, the 2005 Act directly reflects the qualified nature of the right to privacy.

Robert Neill: The Minister is being most generous, but will he help me? He asserts, in terms, that if the inquiry is set up under the Act, it automatically triggers some of the exemptions to article 8. What is the remedy, however, if a person who is to be called as a witness by the inquiry is aggrieved and wishes to challenge the finding of the inquiry chair to admit the evidence of a spent conviction? Would there be a judicial review in the ordinary way?

Robert Buckland: There would be a judicial review. That point was considered carefully in the other place. I readily accept and deal full on with the potentially onerous nature of having to bring a judicial review to challenge proceedings. But as I have said, the filter system that any chair would have to operate is considerable. There are safeguards and guarantees in respect of anonymity and publication that provide the sort of safeguard that, if misapplied, would quickly and obviously attract criticism when a higher court came to scrutinise the decision process.

Victoria Prentis: Will the Minister help the House? Are the chairmen of these inquiries not nearly always senior judges, who are perfectly able to make the sort of evaluation that he is telling us about?

Robert Buckland: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. As she will know, the process of obtaining a senior serving member of the judiciary will be done in consultation between the appropriate Secretary of State or Minister and, usually, the Lord Chief Justice, who will consider availability carefully. Retired High Court judges or lord and lady justices of appeal can also be considered. We are particularly fortunate, as I said at the beginning, to have Sir John and, formerly, Sir Christopher. They were asked to fulfil the role of chair as a result of consultation between Ministers and the Lord Chief Justice.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): If I understand it, this is about spent convictions. As we do not know the nature of any future inquiry in which spent convictions would need to be disclosed, would it not make sense to introduce a statutory instrument when a future inquiry needs such disclosure?

Robert Buckland: The hon. Lady tempts me down the road of ad hocery, which, as we know, can be a somewhat cumbersome instrument when it comes to issues of this nature. She can be reassured that the narrow nature of this proposed exception means that, first, the type of inquiry is tightly constrained to within the 2005 Act. Secondly, I do not envisage that many of even those types of inquiry will have to deal with the issue of spent convictions. Where they do, there will be a clear process for the chair to follow in ascertaining whether the spent convictions should be anonymised and whether they should be published. I would submit that there are lots of safeguards, which I hope will cure her justified concerns.

I am at times, quite properly, an advocate of ad hocery, which has been part of our system since time immemorial, and I agree with the words of the noble Lord Mackay of Clashfern, the former Lord Chancellor:

“My Lords, I well understand the need for this order in respect of the application that has been made, but innovating the Rehabilitation of Offenders Act to any extent can be done only as a matter of principle. It cannot be done ad hoc for a particular inquiry. Therefore, what is the principle under which it would be allowable in respect of this inquiry? The answer is that it is required to fulfil the inquiry’s remit. Only that would justify it. The application says, ‘We cannot fulfil the remit we have been given unless we are allowed to examine this matter’.

In my submission, it is extremely difficult to have an ad hoc system.”—[Official Report, House of Lords, 20 May 2019; Vol. 797, c. 1788-89.]

I entirely agree with the noble Lord, and I would pray in aid his remarks in support of my argument today.

I was addressing the right to privacy, and I was going to elaborate upon my earlier remarks on anonymity. Inquiry chairs must preserve the anonymity of individuals as far as is necessary to respect their legal right to privacy. The chair of an inquiry has the power under section 19 of the 2005 Act to restrict the publication of information via a restriction notice. The undercover policing inquiry, for example, has invited applications for restriction orders. Individuals can use these orders to seek to maintain their anonymity.

The chairman must apply a strict balancing test under section 19, taking all relevant circumstances, including potential harm or damage to an individual, into account when deciding to make a restriction order. Where an individual is not satisfied that this has been done appropriately, they can make representations to the inquiry and ultimately, as I said in response to my hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Robert Neill), they can judicially review the decision. Together, we feel these represent a strong system of checks to ensure that individuals’ rights are upheld.
As some inquiries will be obliged to have regard to the rights of those who hold criminal records and to the legitimacy of using such evidence in the course of their duties, our view is that the duties of all inquiries are of sufficient seriousness to justify clarifying that they may take spent criminal record evidence into consideration where they believe it is necessary.

Although we do not think that considering spent convictions is likely to be necessary for the vast majority of inquiries, adding only the UCPI to the exceptions order would set a precedent that may lead to further requests—that is the ad hocery point. Adding those inquiries to the exceptions order now will ensure that more efficient use is made of the parliamentary process, as further amendments will not be required for each specific individual inquiry as and when it arises.

Not proceeding with legislation would prevent the UCPI and other statutory inquiries from admitting evidence of spent convictions, which would mean treating people with spent convictions as though those convictions had never occurred. The worry is that the inquiries would then have to accept a somewhat distorted version of reality. That could ultimately lead to conclusions based in part, or sometimes in whole, on false premises, which clearly would not be in the public interest.

We have to remember the wider purpose of inquiries set up under the 2005 Act, the job that chairs are given, the serious and grave nature of many of these inquiries and the strong public interest that underpins and runs through such proceedings and their purpose. My conclusion is that not doing so would clearly not be in the wider public interest, and I therefore strongly commend this statutory instrument to the House.

2.46 pm

Yasmin Qureshi (Bolton South East) (Lab): I welcome the Minister to his new position. We worked together on the Justice Committee and, as always, he is eloquent in trying to convince the House to pass something that I am sure, in his heart of hearts, he knows is not correct. As a lawyer and advocate, he must understand the concerns that have been raised, especially in the other place. I am sure he is well aware that the other place voted against this statutory instrument and the rebellion included a number of Conservative Members of the House of Lords. I ask him, even at this stage, to reconsider whether this statutory instrument should be approved.

The Opposition understand the sentiment and the principle behind this statutory instrument in terms of assisting public inquiries into groups where spent convictions may or may not be relevant. The request came from Sir John Mitting, the chair of the inquiry into undercover police operations from 1968 onwards, including whether the police were justified in launching undercover operations against this particular group.

The request makes sense because one of the issues in this particular undercover operation is whether any of the convictions occurred because of agents provocateurs, which is where a person has committed an offence because an undercover police officer somehow encouraged or facilitated it, or put the idea in their head. The concept of agents provocateurs is a complex legal issue, and it is clear from some of the allegations that this may have happened in this set of undercover police operations, so the convictions of some of those who may give evidence will be pertinent and relevant because they might shed light on the actions of the police officers. Therefore, we understand that for this particular inquiry this approach may be relevant and probably have already been considered in the context to the inquiries that we would not have under the current system. However, we believe that the wording of this proposal is far too wide and is not properly structured. As my colleague Baroness Chakrabarti said, it seeks to use “a sledgehammer to crack a walnut.”—[Official Report, House of Lords, 20 May 2019; Vol. 797, c. 1786.]

It is too far-reaching and too blunt to be effective without seriously threatening rehabilitation and privacy.

The powers granted by the order would mean that the spent convictions of past offenders under investigation would become unspent in terms of policing and inquiries, and, crucially, may become unspent in the public eye. It completely goes against the spirit of rehabilitation that served sentences may be reopened for potentially unconnected investigatory purposes. In this information age, the checks and balances proposed by the Minister, whereby an inquiry’s chair may rule spent convictions inadmissible, may come too late to protect the individual; this information may be raised and shared by counsel in countless different circumstances before the chair can decide whether it is relevant and, therefore, admissible. Furthermore, given the speed at which information travels on the internet, any ruling by a chair could become a bit of a lame-duck decision, because the information would probably already have reached the public sphere. Indeed, Lord Hogan-Howe, the former Metropolitan Chief Commissioner, pointed out that the internet hive mind may mean that “the public may know more than the inquiry chairman.”—[Official Report, House of Lords, 20 May 2019; Vol. 797, c. 1791.]

In essence, once the information is out, the information is out, and it is unrealistic to expect every subject of this instrument to have the energy, time and resources to lodge a judicial review or request a restriction order to maintain anonymity. In any case, a restriction order from the chair of the inquiry would be likely to come too late to prevent the damage being done.

It is worth noting that, since the introduction of the 2005 Act, there have been only 23 public inquiries and this is the first time that a provision such as this has been proposed. Surely we should not be setting such a troubling precedent because of one inquiry; 22 others have not sought such blunt and excessive powers. It would only take someone to overlook a potentially minor and irrelevant conviction in their past and fail to mention it to their representative for their credibility and witness evidence to be undermined. This really calls into question how far the justice system will try to support rehabilitation, when spent convictions can be brought into public inquiries with limited oversight.

The checks and balances proposed seriously threaten article 8 of the European convention on human rights because they presume, first, that information regarding spent convictions will not reach the public eye without prior approval and, secondly, that the subjects of the instrument have the time, energy and resources to ensure that their rights are properly protected. I re-emphasise this point because reclassification has already happened due to aid cuts and all the other cuts that have been carried out, and with a lot of people who are involved in these inquiries often not being financially solvent, trying to
get legal assistance to maintain a judicial challenge or review is almost impossible. The lives of these ordinary people are being made even worse with this particular legislation, given the wide nature of its current format; people’s rights will not be properly effected.

At the heart of our criminal justice system is a need for the rehabilitation of convicted offenders, and the need for fair and transparent public inquiries is of real public interest. If the alternative to this overarching order is to individually discuss the procedures of each public inquiry, that is a use of parliamentary time that accurately reflects public interest; I would much sooner the House establish the admissibility of spent convictions in terms of a public inquiry in advance of each inquiry.

Again, I say to the Minister that it is still not too late to take this SI away and reconsider the issues we have raised. We are talking about real issues, such as the fact that vulnerable witnesses may be dissuaded from giving evidence to a public inquiry for fear that a spent conviction for a minor offence committed when they were a child could come up and be in the public domain, and their families could find out, as could prospective employers. The consequences for those victims may be enormous, so they may not wish to engage in any particular inquiry, in which case we would not be being very effective. The Secondary Legislation Scrutiny Committee expressed serious concerns about “the breadth of the power and what impact it might have on the lives of those who have been rehabilitated.”

As I have said, we successfully tabled a motion of regret about this SI in the other place. We gained sizeable support on this matter, including from some on the Conservative Benches. A Conservative peer, Lord Hodgson of Astley Abbotts, who is a member of that Committee, said that the concerns of the Committee and the other House were raised with the Ministry of Justice but its response was “largely fanciful” and “not realistic”. We therefore ask the Government and the Minister to seriously reconsider this SI, for all the reasons that have been mentioned.

2.56 pm

Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): I am always wary of extending powers that can trespass upon the convention rights of citizens and generally wary of giving blanket powers to organs of the state. I am very much in favour of the rehabilitation of offenders legislation and spent convictions. As the right hon. Member for Delyn (David Hanson) observed, the Justice Committee recently published a report that urges the Government to consider reducing the amount of disclosure that is required, particularly in relation to spent convictions that occurred when the person concerned was a child or young person. There is no doubt that that is a desirable course of action, because the inappropriate and unnecessary disclosure of spent convictions can be a serious bar to rehabilitation—I think we would all be as one on that.

That is why I looked twice when I saw this statutory instrument; I looked at it with some care and at what was said about it in the other place. On balance, having listened to the Minister’s careful and thoughtful explanation, and with all respect to the hon. Member for Bolton South East (Yasmin Qureshi), who spoke from the Opposition Front Bench and for whom I have great regard, I find that the objection to it is ill-founded. This is enabling legislation, in the sense that, I understand, it makes provision for spent convictions to be admitted in particular classes of statutory inquiry where they are relevant—it is not general legislation insisting that this should happen. As the Minister rightly said, the relevance test has to be met in any event.

One or two questions are raised that we could helpfully think about. First, it is asserted that there may be a risk of people being dissuaded from becoming witnesses at an inquiry if the provision is in force. With respect to the Opposition Front Bencher, I am not convinced by that, because the same would happen under the ad hocery arrangement that is suggested. If someone were likely to be a witness in a particular inquiry, they would be put off as much by ad hoc secondary legislation as by the generally enabling provision before the House.

Victoria Prentis: Does my hon. Friend agree that as statutory inquiries have the ability to summons witnesses, as much as many courts do, that would deal with the issue?

Robert Neill: That is precisely right. Someone summoned to give evidence to a statutory inquiry would be obliged to come forward. With all due respect, it seems to me that it is a false point that should not weigh on us.

The second point is that even when people are summoned there is still a safeguard. It seems to me that the safeguard of the application of the test of relevance, in what is after all an inquisitorial process, as opposed to the criminal, adversarial one, is proper and appropriate. I am concerned about the potential cost of somebody having to seek a judicial review, because that process is lengthy and difficult.

Robert Buckland: One of the great functions of this debate is to tease out some of the issues. Before public inquiries are published, is there not a Maxwellisation process whereby individuals who might be referred to in a way that is potentially adverse to their interests are notified? Is that not another safeguard?

Robert Neill: It is indeed; my hon. and learned Friend anticipates the point I was about to move on to. A series of steps and procedures have to be gone through in relation to a statutory inquiry, and that puts the person concerned on clear notice that the issue may become relevant and may be raised. They then have the opportunity to make representations before the chair of the inquiry. Should the ruling go against them, there is then the fall-back position of a judicial review.

Out of a sense of fairness, and taking an approach of equality of arms, if someone is summoned to give evidence before a statutory inquiry and it is likely that a spent conviction is going to be considered as being admissible and argument is going to take place on those grounds, that person, if they are not otherwise legally represented already, ought to have the opportunity to be legally represented. I urge my hon. and learned Friend to consider, where appropriate, with those in his Department who deal with matters of legal aid, that that person, if they are not represented either as part of a class or group or because of their own means, should have access to legal aid to argue before the inquiry whether the spent conviction should be admitted. It involves a very small sum of money because in practice it is likely to happen only on a limited number of occasions.
That would be an appropriate additional safeguard from the point of view of equality of arms. I hope that my hon. and learned Friend will take that point away. Subject to that request, I think that the safeguards met. It is better to deal with this matter with one piece of legislation rather than to come back on an ad hoc basis.

I hope that this discussion also reminds us all of the advantage of having legally qualified inquiry chairs. Non-statutory inquiries that do not have legally qualified chairs have sometimes spiralled out of control because the chairs are not adept at dealing with, for example, the admissibility of evidence or case management generally, in the same way as a judge is able to. Perhaps that lesson can be taken away, too, but that should not stand in the way of our supporting a useful and proportionate statutory instrument, having weighed up all the pros and cons, as we have in this debate.

3.3 pm

Robert Buckland: This might not have been the longest of debates, but I very much hope that those listening, particularly in the other place, will abandon their usual criticism of our House, because it has been a wide-ranging debate. It has included not only contributions from the Opposition Front Bench—I am grateful to the hon. Member for Bolton South East (Yasmin Qureshi) for her warm words; we served together on the Justice Committee for a lengthy period and her background in law is well known—but important contributions in interventions from the right hon. Member for Delyn (David Hanson) and my hon. Friend the Member for Banbury (Victoria Prentis), and the speech of my hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Robert Neill), the Chair of the Justice Committee.

Through the debate we have dealt with and, I hope, laid to rest some of the objections that have been raised. On the objection that somehow the prospect of the potential disclosure of spent convictions in the limited circumstances described might deter people from coming forward, it has been pointed out that witnesses can be and are summoned under the 2005 Act inquiry process, so the question of their not choosing to come forward becomes somewhat more academic.

On the issue of challenge, I have already set out the five-stage test that the chair of an inquiry would apply before admitting into evidence and then publishing the details of spent convictions. Under the Maxwellisation process, before publication the chair and the inquiry secretariat will invite representations from people who might be referred to in a way that is adverse to their personal interest, and those people will then be able to make full representations before final publication. That is yet another check and balance in the inquiry system.

Let me say a few words of slight dissent from what my hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst said about always needing a former judge, perhaps, or someone who is legally qualified as chair. I pray in aid the independent inquiry into child abuse, which Professor Alexis Jay is chairing expertly. Of course, she enjoys the support of highly qualified lawyers: the counsel to that inquiry, Brian Altman QC, and his team are there to help to make sure that the inquiry keeps very much to the course of relevance, and they look carefully at how proceedings are conducted. Of course, those proceedings are ongoing, so I shall say no more about them out of respect for the independence of that important inquiry and its work.

The Government are absolutely committed not only to maintaining the protections in the Rehabilitation of Offenders Act 1974 but to looking into proposals for strengthening it. I look forward to engaging warmly with right hon. and hon. Members on that work. There is a strong case for adding the type of inquiry we have discussed to the exceptions order. An ad hoc approach would not be appropriate. I submit that the strong public interest that would be served by the proposal, the narrow nature of the extension, the checks and balances that will exist to protect the interests of those affected and the wider public interest should all drive the House to the conclusion that this draft statutory instrument should indeed be approved, and I commend it to the House.

Question put.

The House proceeded to a Division.

The House having divided: Ayes 266, Noes 192.

Votes cast by Members for constituencies in England and Wales: Ayes 250, Noes 185.

Division No. 417] [3.7 pm

AYES

Adams, Nigel
Afolami, Bim
Afriyie, Adam
Aldous, Peter
Allan, Lucy
Amess, Sir David
Andrew, Stuart
Argar, Edward
Atkins, Victoria
Bacon, Mr Richard
Badenoch, Mrs Kemi
Baker, Mr Steve
Baldwin, Harriett
Bebb, Guto
Bellingham, Sir Henry
Benyon, rh Richard
Beresford, Sir Paul
Berry, Jake
Blackman, Bob
Blunt, Crispin
Bottomley, Sir Peter
Bowie, Andrew
Bradley, Ben
Brady, Sir Graham
Breerton, Jack
Bridge, Andrew
Brine, Steve
Bruce, Fiona
Buckland, Robert
Burghart, Alex
Burns, Conor
Burt, rh Alistair
Cairns, rh Alun
Cartidge, James
Caulfield, Maria
Chalk, Alex
Churchill, Jo
Clark, Collin
Clark, rh Craig
Clarke, Mr Simon
Cleverly, James
Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey

Coffey, Dr Thérèse
Collins, Damian
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
Djanogly, Mr Jonathan
Docherley, Leo
Dodds, rh Nigel
Donaldson, rh Sir Jeffrey M.
Donelan, Michelle
Double, Steve
Dowden, Oliver
Doyly-Price, Jackie
Drax, Richard
Duddridge, James
Duguid, David
Duncan, rh Sir Alan
Duncan Smith, rh Mr Iain
Dunne, rh Mr Philip
Ellis, Michael
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
Francois, rh Mr Mark
Frazer, Lucy
Freeman, George
Freer, Mike
Fysh, Mr Marcus
Speelman, rh Dame Caroline
Spencer, Mark
Stevenson, John
Stewart, Bob
Streeter, Sir Gary
Stride, rh Mel
Stuart, Graham
Sturdy, Julian
Sunak, Rishi
Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
Swire, rh Sir Hugo
Syms, Sir Robert
Thomas, Derek
Thomson, Ross
Throup, Maggie
Tolhurst, Kelly
Tomlinson, Justin
Tomlinson, Michael
Tracey, Craig
Tredinnick, David
Trevelyan, Anne-Marie

Truss, rh Elizabeth
Tugendhat, Tom
Vara, Mr Shailesh
Vickers, Martin
Villiers, rh Theresa
Walker, Mr Charles
Walker, Mr Robin
Wallace, rh Mr Ben
Warman, Matt
Watling, Giles
Whatley, Helen
 Wheeler, Mrs Heather
Whittaker, Craig
Wiggin, Bill
Woo, Mike
Wragg, Mr William
Wright, rh Jeremy

Tellers for the Ayes:
Wendy Morton and
Iain Stewart

NOES

Abrahams, Debbie
Ali, Rushanara
Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena
Amesbury, Mike
Antoniacci, Tonia
Ashworth, Jonathan
Bailey, Mr Adrian
Barron, rh Sir Kevin
Beckett, rh Margaret
Benn, rh Hilary
Betts, Mr Clive
Blackman-Woods, Dr Roberta
Blomfield, Paul
Brabin, Tracy
Bradshaw, rh Mr Ben
Brake, rh Tom
Brennan, Kevin
Brown, Lyn
Brown, rh Mr Nicholas
Bryant, Chris
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Richard
Byrne, rh Liam
Cadbury, Ruth
Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair
Champion, Sarah
Charalambous, Bambos
Clywd, rh Ann
Cooper, Julie
Cooper, rh Yvette
Crausby, Sir David
Creagh, Mary
Creasy, Stella
Cryer, John
Cummings, Judith
Cunningham, Alex
Cunningham, Mr Jim
Daby, Janet
Dakin, Nic
David, Wayne
Davies, Geraint
Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh
Dodds, Anneliese
Dowd, Peter
Drew, Dr David
Dromey, Jack
Duffield, Rosie

Gale, rh Sir Roger
Garnier, Mark
 Gibb, rh Nick
Gillan, rh Dame Cheryl
Givan, Paul
Glen, John
Goldsmith, Zac
Goodwill, rh Mr Robert
Gove, rh Michael
Graham, Richard
Grant, Bill
Grant, Mrs Helen
Gray, James
Green, Chris
Green, rh Dame Christian
Greening, rh Justine
Griffiths, Andrew
Gyimah, Mr Sam
Halfon, rh Robert
Hall, Luke
Hammond, Stephen
Hancock, rh Matt
Hands, rh Greg
Harper, rh Mr Mark
Harris, Rebecca
Harrison, Trudy
Hart, Simon
Hayes, rh Sir John
Heald, rh Sir Oliver
Heappey, James
Heaton-Harris, Chris
Heaton-Jones, Peter
Henderson, Gordon
Herbert, rh Nick
Hinds, rh Damian
Hoare, Simon
Hollingbery, George
Hollinrake, Kevin
Hollobone, Mr Philip
Howell, John
Huddleston, Nigel
Hughes, Eddie
Jack, Mr Alister
James, Margot
Jayawardena, Mr Ranil
Jenkin, Sir Bernard
Jenkyns, Andrea
Jenrick, Robert
Johnson, rh Boris
Johnson, Dr Caroline
Johnson, Gareth
Johnson, Joseph
Jones, Andrew
Jones, rh Mr David
Jones, Mr Marcus
Kaczynski, Daniel
Keeghan, Gillian
Kennedy, Seema
Kerr, Stephen
Knight, rh Sir Greg
Knight, Julian
Lamont, John
Latham, Mrs Pauline
Leadsom, rh Andrea
Lee, Dr Phillip
Lefroy, Jeremy
Leigh, rh Sir Edward
Leitwin, rh Sir Oliver
Lewer, Andrew
Lewis, rh Dr Julian
Liddell-Grainger, Mr Ian
Liddington, rh Mr David
Lopez, Julia
Lopresti, Jack
Loughton, Tim
Mackinlay, Craig
Maclean, Rachel
Main, Mrs Anne
Maithouse, Kit
Mann, Scott
Mansfield, Paul
Maynard, Paul
McLoughlin, rh Sir Patrick
McPartland, Stephen
McVey, rh Ms Esther
Menzies, Mark
Merriman, Huw
Metcalf, Stephen
Miller, rh Mrs Maria
Milling, Amanda
Mills, Nigel
Mitchell, rh Mr Andrew
Moore, Damien
Morgan, rh Nicky
Morris, Anne Marie
Morris, David
Morris, James
Murray, Mrs Sheryll
Murison, rh Dr Andrew
Neill, Robert
Newton, Sarah
Nokes, rh Caroline
Norman, Jesse
O’Brien, Neil
Offord, Dr Matthew
Opperman, Guy
Parish, Neil
Paterson, rh Mr Owen
Pawsey, Mark
Penning, rh Sir Mike
Penrose, John
Philp, Chris
Pincher, rh Christopher
Poulter, Dr Dan
Pow, Rebecca
Prentis, Victoria
Prisk, Mr Mark
Pursglove, Tom
Quin, Jeremy
Quince, Will
Raab, rh Dominic
Redwood, rh John
Rees-Mogg, Mr Jacob
Roberson, rh Mr Laurence
Robinson, Gavin
Robinson, Mary
Rosindell, Andrew
Rowley, Lee
Rudd, rh Amber
Rutley, David
Sandbach, Antoinette
Scurry, Paul
Seely, Mr Bob
Selsor, Andrew
Shannon, rh Jim
Shapps, rh Grant
Sharma, Alok
Simpson, David
Skidmore, Chris
Smith, Chloe (Proxy vote cast by Jo Churchill)
Smith, Henry
Smith, rh Julian
Soames, rh Sir Nicholas
Spelman, rh Dame Caroline
Spencer, Mark
Stevenson, John
Stewart, Bob
Streeter, Sir Gary
Stride, rh Mel
Stuart, Graham
Sturdy, Julian
Sunak, Rishi
Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
Swire, rh Sir Hugo
Syms, Sir Robert
Thomas, Derek
Thomson, Ross
Throup, Maggie
Tolhurst, Kelly
Tomlinson, Justin
Tomlinson, Michael
Tracey, Craig
Tredinnick, David
Trevelyan, Anne-Marie

Truss, rh Elizabeth
Tugendhat, Tom
Vara, Mr Shailesh
Vickers, Martin
Villiers, rh Theresa
Walker, Mr Charles
Walker, Mr Robin
Wallace, rh Mr Ben
Warman, Matt
Watling, Giles
Whatley, Helen
 Wheeler, Mrs Heather
Whittaker, Craig
Wiggin, Bill
Wood, Mike
Wragg, Mr William
Wright, rh Jeremy

Tellers for the Ayes:
Wendy Morton and
Iain Stewart

NOES

Eagle, Ms Angela
Eagle, Maria
Edwards, Jonathan
Efford, Clive
Elliot, 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
Gaffrey, Hugh
Gardiner, Barry
George, Ruth
Gill, Preet Kaur
Glindon, Mary
Godsiff, Mr Roger
Goodman, Helen
Greenwood, Lilian
Greenwood, Margaret
Grogan, John
Gwynne, Andrew
Hanson, rh David
Harman, rh Ms Harriet
Harris, Carolyn
Hayes, Helen
Hayman, Sue
Healey, rh John
Hendrick, Sir Mark
Hepburn, Mr Stephen
Hill, Mike
Hiller, Meg
Hobhouse, Wera
Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, rh Mr George
Huq, Dr Rupa
Jones, Darren
Jones, Gerald
Jones, Graham P.
Jones, rh Mr Kevan
Jones, Ruth
Jones, Susan Elan
The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (David Rutley): I beg to move,

That the draft Animal Welfare (Licensing of Activities Involving Animals) (England) (Amendment) Regulations 2019, which were laid before this House on 13 May, be approved.

It is good to be here in the Chamber taking action on animal welfare again, after the Third Reading of the Wild Animals in Circuses Bill yesterday, and I very much appreciate the support of so many hon. Members for that legislation.

The regulations are important because they put in place Lucy’s law. They establish a ban on commercial third-party sales of puppies and kittens under six months of age in England—a ban that has been called for by committed campaigners and that has overwhelming public support. This is a positive step forward in cracking down on unscrupulous breeders and tackling the scourge of puppy smuggling.

Lucy was a Cavalier King Charles spaniel who died in 2016 after suffering terrible conditions on a Welsh puppy farm. Her plight inspired the Lucy’s law campaign, which harnessed widespread support from the public and the animal welfare sector. Dogs such as Lucy are often used by unscrupulous breeders to produce multiple litters of puppies, which are taken from their mothers when just a few weeks old and advertised online or sold in pet shops.

There is not an animal lover in the land who would wish to support this abhorrent profiteering from cruelty, but here is the problem: under current rules, it is difficult for would-be buyers to know whether a seller is a bona fide hobby breeder who raises puppies and kittens in a caring environment, as their advertisement claims, or someone who breeds animals simply as a money-making exercise, without regard for their welfare.

The hon. Gentleman makes a good point. It is good to see that he has been campaigning hard locally on these issues and supports this campaign and that his constituents feel the same. I can assure him that this legislation will be a material step on. It has been welcomed by charities across the board—I will praise them in a minute for the fantastic work they have been doing—which feel assured that the proposals will be taken against the rogue elements among breeders, and there will be a lot of support for the measures that are being brought forward. The Minister is absolutely right about the appalling scenes that we have seen. To what extent does he believe that the steps being proposed will not just make things a little better but end this evil trade once and for all?

David Rutley: The hon. Gentleman makes a good point. It is good to see that he has been campaigning hard locally on these issues and supports this campaign and that his constituents feel the same. I can assure him that this legislation will be a material step on. It has been welcomed by charities across the board—I will praise them in a minute for the fantastic work they have been doing—which feel assured that the proposals will not only crack down on unscrupulous breeders but be a positive step against puppy smuggling.

Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): Many of my constituents feel strongly that stronger action needs to be taken against the rogue elements among breeders, and there will be a lot of support for the measures that are being brought forward. The Minister is absolutely right about the appalling scenes that we have seen. To what extent does he believe that the steps being proposed will not just make things a little better but end this evil trade once and for all?

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): Following on from the Minister’s proper remark about positive steps, does he agree that those who adopt rescue animals—dogs and cats, but particularly dogs—deserve a great round of applause because they are not only fulfilling
their own needs but helping to provide a proper home to an animal that would otherwise be mistreated or abandoned?

David Rutley: That is absolutely right. This legislation means that people will be able to buy puppies directly from a breeder or from a rehoming centre. It is vital to recognise that those who bring a rehomed puppy or kitten into their home are really looking after the welfare of that animal. Their efforts should absolutely be praised, and I am pleased that my hon. Friend has done that today.

The activities of these unscrupulous breeders are bad for buyers and also bad for the countless good breeders in this country whose reputations and businesses are at risk when the actions of others less decent than themselves threaten the integrity of the sector overall. That is why we are taking action today, just like we did yesterday.

I would like to thank the brilliant campaigners and animal lovers who have helped to bring this positive change before the House today. The Lucy’s law campaign has been championed by vet and campaigner Marc Abraham and his fellow campaigners at Pup Aid. Lucy’s law is supported tirelessly by organisations big and small, including the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, Battersea Dogs and Cats Home, and the Dogs Trust, all of which do so much to strengthen animal welfare across the country. I should also highlight the important work and support of the all-party parliamentary group on dog welfare so ably chaired by the hon. Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow (Dr Cameron), who is in her place.

This decision to ban third-party sales of puppies and kittens followed a call for evidence in a public consultation that received over 6,500 responses, of which no fewer than 96% supported the proposal. The call for evidence was launched in response to an e-petition that called for a ban on the sale of puppies by pet shops and other third parties. The petition received over 148,000 signatures and triggered a debate in the House on 21 May 2018. This further demonstrates how Parliament and this Government can respond to public concerns.

Mrs Anne Main (St Albans) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that we also have to stamp down on those who steal puppies to order? Many puppies are taken from outside people’s houses, outside shops and the like simply because there is a market for them. This measure makes the market more regulated, and that can only be applauded.

David Rutley: I thank my hon. Friend, who makes another really good point. Absolutely—this will help in that dimension, but there is also more that we need to do to make people more aware of where they are sourcing their puppies. We need to do more to tackle puppy theft and dog theft. We will be working on that with various campaigners in the months ahead.

Ann Clwyd (Cynon Valley) (Lab): Everyone involved in the tough grassroots campaigning that took over 10 years to reach this point should be congratulated. I would particularly like to congratulate people in my constituency who worked very hard to get to this point. Will the hon. Gentleman confirm that at the moment Wales is not included in this measure? Does he expect the Welsh Government to follow suit very quickly in doing a similar thing?

David Rutley: I thank the right hon. Lady for her point. I will come on to what happens in the devolved Administrations. It is fair to say, however, that the Welsh Government are now considering their response to the three-month consultation. I praise her local campaigners for their hard work. It does take time to get these changes through, but I am pleased to say that in the space of a couple of days we are taking really tough action, on a cross-party basis, to move the agenda forward on animal welfare.

This statutory instrument implements Lucy’s law by making an amendment to the parent regulations—the Animal Welfare (Licensing of Activities Involving Animals) (England) Regulations 2018. The commercial sale of pets is already a licensable activity. The amendment means that licensed pet sellers, including pet shops and dealers, will no longer be able to sell puppies or kittens under the age of six months unless they themselves have bred the animals. Alongside the public consultation, a draft regulatory triage assessment was published. This legislation does not require a full impact assessment as the net estimated impact falls significantly below the necessary threshold of £5 million.

The ban will enter into force on 6 April 2020. The additional time before the ban coming into force will allow the sector to prepare. If the ban is rushed, it may encourage abandonment of puppies or their breeding mothers, or other unscrupulous activity. This approach is being supported by welfare groups and campaigners. Once it is enforced, the best place to buy or adopt a puppy or kitten will be directly with the responsible breeder or through one of the country’s many animal rehoming centres.

This Government have shown that we take animal welfare very seriously.

Toby Perkins: The Minister is absolutely right to publicise and to put on record how many excellent, responsible breeders there are out there. There have been occasions in the past where Governments have legislated for all the right reasons but ended up creating nightmares for some of the smaller organisations, in particular. What representations has he had on this, and how much can he reassure us that the legislation, as well as being robust, is sufficiently well drafted that it will not create unintended consequences for responsible smaller breeders?

David Rutley: That is a good point. I think the hon. Gentleman will also recognise that when the regulations to which he is referring were introduced last year, the Department took a step back, listened to the concerns and addressed them. We have learned from that and worked closely with a number of welfare groups to ensure that the regulations before us are in a really good state, and we have time ahead of 6 April 2020 to ensure that they are fully worked through.

This instrument will help to address a number of welfare concerns associated with puppies and kittens bought and sold by third parties. Those concerns include the early separation of animals from their mothers, unnecessary journeys at a young age from breeder to pet shop, the sale of puppies and kittens at inappropriate
commercial premises, and unscrupulous breeders who are associated with third-party sales. The ban will help to tackle the blight of puppy smuggling, and it will also help the public to make more informed and responsible choices when sourcing a puppy or kitten. It will build on the new licensing regulations, which came into force in October 2018 and introduced a range of welfare improvements for dog breeding and pet sales.

Comprehensive statutory guidance underpins the 2018 regulations, and it was produced by the sectors concerned under the auspices of the Canine and Feline Sector Group. The Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs is updating the statutory guidance on the activity of selling animals as pets, to take account of this ban on third-party sales. The changes are intended to assist local authority inspectors and licence holders by clarifying that non-commercial rehoming of puppies and kittens does not require a licence and requiring local authorities to notify existing licence holders of the change, so that they can prepare appropriately.

The guidance also outlines how to determine whether a licence holder bred the puppies and kittens they offer for sale, which is very important. A licence holder should be able to provide supporting evidence such as photographs, microchips and veterinary records to show that they housed and cared for the animal and its mother for the first eight weeks of its life, as well as the licence itself. The draft guidance has been shared with the sector, and we intend to finalise it well before the ban comes into force in April 2020, which I hope addresses the concerns raised by the hon. Member for Chesterfield (Toby Perkins).

This statutory instrument applies to England only because the parent regulations apply to England only. Animal welfare is a fully devolved issue, and respective parts of the United Kingdom have slightly different approaches to the licensing of pet sellers and other animal activities. I understand that a three-month consultation was recently concluded on banning third-party sales in Wales, and the Welsh Government are now considering those responses, which is good news. In Northern Ireland, Members of the Legislative Assembly have shown support for a similar ban to be introduced, and officials in the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs are following developments in England closely. Scotland has committed to reform the licensing of sanctuaries, breeders and pet shops and is considering a ban on third-party sales.

Chris Davies (Brecon and Radnorshire) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend for introducing this excellent piece of legislation. He mentioned Wales. The Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee visited a puppy farm in Wales about three years ago—I am sure that the Chair of the Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Neil Parish), will touch on this—and it changed my mind on puppy farming. It was very disappointing to see that dogs could not be dogs. Could the Minister speak to the Welsh Government, to ensure that the information he has gleaned is shared with them and they can reach the same conclusion as us?

David Rutley: I know that a lot is going on to share best practice and experience among the devolved Administrations, and I will ensure that that takes place. I am sure that there is an active dialogue. There certainly has been a very active dialogue in preparing the many Ms related to EU exit, so those relationships have been formed. It makes absolute sense, because in some areas Scotland is slightly ahead of us, and in this area we will be slightly ahead of other devolved Administrations. We do not want to have an animal welfare race, but we certainly want to ensure that we learn from this experience, because it is about the welfare of very important and much loved animals. My hon. Friend makes a good point, and we will follow that up.

The ban on commercial third-party sales of puppies and kittens is an important step towards further improving welfare standards to ensure that our beloved pet dogs and cats have the best start in life. This Government are committed to protecting and enhancing the welfare of animals, and this statutory instrument is another step in delivering on these commitments. For the reasons I have set out, I commend this statutory instrument to the House.

3.39 pm

Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): I am delighted to be able to take part in this short debate. The Minister will be relieved that we will not divide the House; in fact, we are very supportive of this measure, and we think its time has come. It has taken a long time to get to this stage, but that does not mean we should in any way undermine how important this bit of legislation is. I will ask the Minister some questions, because this is one of a number of pieces of legislation that DEFRA is obliged to bring forward, and we are clearly still looking for improvements to sentencing. Dare I say we need a definition of sentence? It is also clear that even rehoming and rescue centres need to be properly defined. I will come on to some of the concerns about that a bit later. As I say, this is only partial legislation, and it has to be made part of much fuller animal welfare legislation.

Today, we will pass this legislation, which is lovingly referred to as Lucy’s law, after the King Charles spaniel that the Minister mentioned. I think it is rather nice that we have given it such a title because that animal was dreadfully abused. It was forced to breed many more times than she should have been and, even worse, the puppies were taken away in the most draconian manner. The petition gained 150,000 signatures, which proves that the British are a nation of animal lovers.

Ann Clwyd: It is worth reminding people that when Lucy was rescued from a Welsh puppy farm five years ago, she was suffering. The Cavalier King Charles spaniel’s hips had fused together, and she had a curved spine, bald patches and epilepsy after years of mistreatment. She had been kept in a cage for most of her life, and was no longer able to have puppies. Although she was rehomed, sadly, she died. In memory of Lucy, I would be grateful to my hon. Friend if he mentioned her and the many people who have campaigned in her name.

Dr Drew: I thank my right hon. Friend for that. Clearly, it is a dreadful story, and she has filled in the back details.

As I have said, I know the British are a nation of animal lovers, but it is wonderful that 150,000 people put their signature where their heart was. The petition was launched by Beverley Cuddy, editor of Dogs Today magazine. She made the rather rash statement that if
the Government accepted it, she would wear an “I love Michael Gove” T-shirt. She may like to give that to the President of the United States when she has finished with it, so he can be completely clear about who that is. She subsequently said that she would wear such a T-shirt about my hon. Friend the Member for Workington (Sue Hayman), the shadow Secretary of State, but we will leave that there.

I pay tribute to the hon. Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow (Dr Cameron)—I never get the constituency quite right, but I will keep trying—who is a doyenne of the all-party group on dog advisory welfare. Of course, a lot of other Members have supported this. Behind the scenes, there has been tireless campaigning by Pup Aid, CARIAD or Care and Respect Includes All Dogs, Canine Action UK, the RSPCA, the Dogs Trust, Battersea Dogs and Cats, and Cats Protection, as well as others I have not mentioned. We can be justly proud of how they have managed to get the law through to this stage. That was not difficult in terms of the complication of the legislation, but the sheer effort of trying to get things through this place does take time and effort.

**Chris Davies:** There is a name the hon. Gentleman has missed out, which is Marc Abraham, who has been right behind this campaign. We heard from the Minister that he is a vet of distinction, and he really has led this campaign from the front. I would like the Opposition Front Bencher to pay him credit.

As the hon. Gentleman has mentioned the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and the T-shirt about loving him, perhaps from the Conservative side of the House I could praise an organisation I do not usually praise, which is the Independent Trust, Battersea Dogs and Cats, and Cats Protection, as well as others I have not mentioned. We can be justly proud of how they have managed to get the law through to this stage. That was not difficult in terms of the complication of the legislation, but the sheer effort of trying to get things through this place does take time and effort.

**Dr Drew:** I was coming on to Marc Abraham, but the hon. Gentleman has pre-empted me. I will take that bit out, as he has paid due regard to Marc.

There are many dog and cat breeders who will hopefully continue to provide the route that people should use to buy their pets. Animal companionship is something that we greatly underestimate. A number of us have fought hard to make sure that places that previously banned people from taking their pets in, including sheltered housing, rethought that, because it is important for people, particularly older people who may live alone, to have such companionship. We strongly support the statutory instrument, but would ask the Minister where the money is coming from, as this is not a nil cost. It is important in its own right, but we should not lose sight of the fact that puppy smuggling is an ever-present and immoral trade. He ended by looking at that to make sure that if we agreed legislation today, it would have a positive impact on puppy smuggling, otherwise we would fail and would need to revisit the legislation and widen it.

My hon. Friend the Member for Leigh (Jo Platt), in a debate that I attended, looked at the need to regulate animal rescue centres. It would be interesting to hear the Minister’s views on that. Is it something that the Government will introduce in due course? The RSPCA has argued that the difference between the best centres for the rehoming and rescue of animals and the worst is so dramatic that we need to look at how we ensure that the poorer centres are removed.

Without further ado, I am very happy to say that we support the regulations. We hope the Government will see them as not just a feather in their cap, but a feather in the cap of all those who led the charge in getting this piece of legislation through. I hope the Minister will say some good things about the other points I have mentioned, because it is no good just passing these regulations if we ignore the other important areas where it is clear there is animal abuse. Everyone in the Chamber wants to bear down on that. We can do our bit not just through this statutory instrument, but by what we do subsequently.

**Neil Parish** (Tiverton and Honiton) (Con): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate. I welcome the Minister’s speech and the statutory instrument. I also welcome the contribution from the hon. Member for Stroud (Dr Drew) and endorse what he said about the need to change the law to increase the sentence to up to five years. At the moment, the maximum sentence is six months and four months if you plead guilty. For some of the horrendous cases, that is not enough. I do not think that party managers on any side of the House need worry about getting the regulations through, as only somebody who is slightly off-piece would go against them. We really need to get this done.

I am happy to welcome the regulations. As my hon. Friend the Member for Brecon and Radnorshire (Chris Davies) said, three years ago, the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee undertook a report into animal welfare. One of our recommendations was to
ban third-party puppy sales. The Government decided that they could not go along with that, but when one chair a Select Committee one never gets too worked up about that because there is a constant dripping and eventually the stone starts to wear and a new Secretary of State comes in and decides on a consultation. It is very good to see the regulations here today.

I want to talk about the practicalities. I, too, pay tribute to Marc Abraham and all the organisations. Many people have supported the campaign to get these measures on to the statute book. I include in that the general public because, as has been said, we are a nation of lovers. Do not forget: we are talking not just about dogs, but about cats. I am always corrected by Cats Protection. Cats also matter very much, so I want to put that on the record.

My hon. Friend the Member for Brecon and Radnorshire talked about the time we visited a puppy farm in Wales. The dogs were bred far too often and did not get proper exercise, and the surroundings and conditions were poor. What also struck me was that the breeders received about £200 for the puppies, which were going to a dealer in Birmingham, who was probably selling them for £500 or £600. There are several issues here. Not only were the puppies bred in the wrong conditions, which were poor, but the money was going back not to the breeders but to the dealers.

I do not know how we deal with this exactly. I think I am right in saying that there are between 7 million and 9 million dogs in the country. That is quite a lot of dogs. If you say that, on average, a dog lives 10 years, you probably need 750,000 puppies a year to replace the dogs that have died. Therefore, we need good, proper puppy breeding probably on a reasonably large scale. It needs to be done properly, with bitches not overbred and other things taken into consideration; otherwise more and more puppies—I know the Government are tightening up on this—will be smuggled into the country. There only needs to be one television programme that promotes a particular breed of dog and then everybody in the world wants that particular breed of dog, and there are not the puppies here, so they become very lucrative. For some of the gangs, it is probably more profitable than dealing in drugs or anything like that and they are less likely to get prosecuted or to get as heavy a penalty. There are criminal elements who see this very much as a money-making operation.

I know that the Government cannot stipulate the quantities and breeds of puppies that are bred, and I do not think the shadow Minister, in a socialist Government, would even consider the idea of prescribing how many breeds or types of dog should be bred—[Interruption.] Only teasing, don’t worry. We must face this issue because we have to ensure that there is a good supply of healthy puppies who are properly assimilated with their mother and are at the right age when they leave her. The set-up should not be as it is in many of these situations, where the puppies do not have their true mother and do not belong to that mother. All those things are a real problem, so this legislation is absolutely right. However, it will not completely cure the problem if we do not deal with the sentencing, so that someone who is cruel to animals can get up to a five-year sentence. Let us send the right message out to the criminal element and let us look at how the puppies are bred and make sure that we encourage best practice.

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): The hon. Gentleman is making an excellent speech and has done a fantastic job on this issue with the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee. There is a big demand for puppies, but does he agree that we should educate the public to take on cats and dogs from cat and dog homes? I mention cats as well; I would not want to miss them out. Such animals make excellent family pets, but they are often overlooked because they are not the in-thing or the popular breed. Part of that is educating the public.

Neil Parish: The hon. Lady always makes a very good contribution and I congratulate her on doing a great deal of work on animal welfare. She is absolutely right; that is essential. If someone wants a puppy, a kitten, a cat or a dog, they should look at what is available at rescue centres. However—as I said before—we have to realise the number of puppies that is needed. Children naturally love a puppy and this is the other problem: very often a child will go along to see a puppy and it might be one that has been misbred, has an illness, or has been smuggled in, but that child falls in love with the puppy and, naturally, the parents buy it for their children. Perhaps there are then huge veterinary bills, or the dog has bad hips, bad shoulders or a bad whatever, and all these things add to the tale of woe. We have to face up to that reality, but the hon. Lady is absolutely right about rescue centres. The point was made, of course, by the Minister and shadow Minister that we have to be careful that these situations are not used as a way of carrying on some sort of abuse of animals.

Chris Davies: As chairman of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee, my hon. Friend led an excellent investigation and inquiry into puppy farming. He raises a particularly strong point. The criminal element in this and every other country will find a vacuum. If we rightly constrain the breeding, there will be a deficit between the number of people wanting puppies and the amount that we can supply, so they will come in from outside. Puppy smuggling will therefore be more of a problem than it is at the moment. As we found during our investigation, many puppies do not reach these shores alive. When they do, they are quite often deformed or damaged and they create a massive problem for the new owner, so we will really need to look at and crack down on puppy smuggling.

Neil Parish: My hon. Friend reinforces exactly the point that I am making: too many puppies will be smuggled in. We are getting tighter at the ports, but we need to get tighter still and have people there. They will come through at different times of the day and night when there is nobody about.

There is another linked issue. Legally, one can go and buy five puppies and bring them in. How many people buy five puppies for themselves? Very few in my estimation. It is a legal loophole. Basically, someone gets a fraudulent form signed by an interesting vet in some other country—I will be diplomatic today, which is unusual for me.

David Rutley: Very unusual.

Neil Parish: I thank the Minister for that sedentary comment.
[Neil Parish]

Seriously, it is a problem. People can legally bring them in. If someone has a signed certificate from a vet in a particular country, they can bring them in. This could be another bonus from Brexit, dare I say it?

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): Speaking as someone who moves our two dogs backwards and forwards all the time on a pet passport, I presume that all five puppies would have pet passports, which are expensive—in our case, about £50 each time we visit the vet.

Neil Parish: My hon. Friend raises an interesting point. It is quite expensive, but I am not convinced that where many of these puppies come from the expense is so great. We must also remember that people are probably making £1,200, £1,500 or even £2,000 per puppy with some breeds. They are not smuggling in mongrels or cross-breeds; they are being in pure-bred dogs, although they are probably not as pure as they think they are and probably have the potential for disease, which is another issue to deal with—we could be bringing in dangerous diseases at the same time.

I have gone on a bit—you have allowed me to digress, Madam Deputy Speaker—but all these things are closely linked, as I am sure the Minister is aware. I welcome the regulations. There is another issue in respect of banning third-party sales. Let us imagine an establishment that is perhaps not the best breeder in the world. There is a problem there. If someone has to go to the premises to buy the puppies, they will, I hope, see the mother and what is happening in that breeding establishment, so to some degree it will be self-policing. If people go there and think there is something wrong, they are likely to report it and action will likely be taken—either the puppy establishment will be closed down or its operation will be tightened up and things will get better, since sometimes people breed badly out of inadequacy, rather than meaning to do it. So there is a combination of things. One only has to talk to the RSPCA to understand the problem.

Those are the key issues. The other issue, of course, which is more difficult for any Government to deal with, is that of backstreet breeding where people breed dangerous dogs. That is where microchipping comes in and all those other things that can hopefully go with it. By linking microchipping with the ban on third-party puppy sales, we should be able to tighten up on the backstreet breeding as well, however difficult it might be. The Metropolitan police and others are very good at the process because they have the specialists, although that is not the case all over the country.

I will not go any wider than that, Madam Deputy Speaker, because you have been very lenient on me. Suffice it to say that I am delighted to support the regulations.

Ann Clwyd: The hon. Gentleman is making an interesting speech. As the owner of the Westminster cat of the year 2019, I think my cat will be concerned that we have not emphasised that the regulations cover cats as well as dogs.

Neil Parish: The right hon. Lady is, of course, right. It is also true that there are still a lot of feral cats, and if a feral cat gives birth to kittens, unless someone gets hold of them within a few days they will be feral as well.

The right hon. Lady need not worry: we will not forget cats. Cats are lovely. Dogs are lovely too, but sometimes they are given, shall I say, too big a bite of the bone.

Let me finally end my speech by asking the Minister not only to introduce this legislation, but, please, to increase the sentence for cruelty to animals to five years as soon as possible.

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): It is a privilege to contribute to such an important debate. Madam Deputy Speaker, and to see you in the Chair listening to it, and it is a pleasure to speak about the important legislation known as Lucy’s law. I thank the Minister for his perseverance: a ban on third-party puppy and kitten sales is a momentous achievement. It has been supported overwhelmingly by the public, and it will make a fundamental difference.

Members of the public do not generally go to the dark web or illicit dealers to buy a puppy or a kitten, although they may do so to buy, for instance, drugs or guns. Most people who want to buy a puppy or a kitten want to make sure that it has come from a good place, that it is healthy, and that they are doing the right thing. This law is important because it will close the market for puppy farmers who are doing such a callous job in respect of animal welfare. Puppy smugglers will also take a direct hit, because there will be no legitimate reason for them to bring lots of puppies into the UK when there is no third-party market from which to sell them.

While the law will not close every loophole, it will tackle many of the issues that have been raised today, including third-party sales. Puppy farmers and smugglers survive because people are unaware of the background of pain and suffering and the abhorrent animal cruelty of puppy farms and puppy smuggling, which is masked because the animals are sold through third parties. Public education campaigns are not enough of themselves; they must be reinforced by legislation. It is confusing when people are told, “Always try to see the mother on site with the puppy that you are buying”, while puppies are being sold via the internet and even in motorway service stations, or through other third parties such as pet shops. In those circumstances, people cannot be sure of a puppy’s background, which is often hidden.

I want to thank, in particular, Marc Abraham. “Where’s mum?” is part of the Lucy’s law campaign, and I believe that both Marc and his own mum are here today. He has shown fantastic leadership in this campaign for many years.

It was an absolute privilege for me, as chair of the all-party parliamentary dog advisory welfare group, to launch the Lucy’s law campaign in Parliament in 2017. It has been a tremendous cross-party campaign. He is not here today, but I wanted particularly to mention the hon. Member for Richmond Park (Zac Goldsmith), who has done so much to support the campaign. The public have really taken to it, and I have been described online a number of times as “the dog woman of Westminster”. They have missed out the cats, but I think that I would have to relinquish that title to the hon. Member for Lewes (Maria Caulfield), who chairs the all-party parliamentary group on cats and who looks after their welfare so well.
As I have said, this is a cross-party campaign. Support for it has been led tremendously well by Marc Abraham, and it has also been supported by Peter Egan, our patron at the all-party group. He is a great animal welfare campaigner, as well as being a fantastic actor.

I want to thank Pup Aid, Sarah Clover and People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals, or PETA. We have received fantastic support from Ricky Gervais, Rachel Riley, Brian May, Beverley Cuddy at Dogs Today, and many others, including Andrew Penman of the Daily Mail, who has already been mentioned. That is to name just a few, but everybody has come together in Parliament—the public, celebrities and animal welfare campaigners—to make this happen. The legislation will follow in Wales, post-consultation; I really do believe that will happen. As the Minister said, consultation is under way in Scotland on a raft of animal welfare measures and I hope that what I could call “MacLucy’s law” will happen in Scotland very soon.

Today’s events are a tribute to Lucy, the King Charles spaniel who is the eponymous hero of Lucy’s law. She was rescued by the wonderful Lisa Garner. As we have heard, until Lucy was rescued she was kept in a cage for most of her former life until she was no longer able to have puppies and then discarded. Her hips were fused together, her spine was curved, she had bald patches and epilepsy and suffered years and years of mistreatment. She had three good years of love with Lisa Garner but unfortunately died in 2016, and the campaign was launched in Parliament in 2017 in tribute to Lucy.

With Lucy’s law we are working together to look after the “underdog”. We are also looking out for all the dogs behind the scenes in puppy farms, hidden from the public, and their pups, who are often sold at five weeks, which is far too young, with no thought for any care or welfare by those engaged in this horrendous activity.

I thank everybody who has campaigned so hard on this important law and the Minister. Lucy’s law has been very much a cross-party, positive achievement in this Parliament and testifies to the progress in animal welfare legislation in this House.

4.11 pm

David Rutley: First, I say once again that it is fantastic to be able to participate in such a positive debate and to make such positive progress. I am grateful for all the contributions made today; they have all been constructive and the three questions raised are legitimate. We do need to answer them and I will do my level best to do so.

It is important to correct the record, however. My hon. Friend the Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Neil Parish) said we are “a nation of lovers”; I think in the context of this debate he meant animal lovers. We will leave the other subject for a different day, but we are talking about animal welfare here today. I just want to make sure that is absolutely clear.

It is important that we do not forget the cats. The right hon. Member for Cynon Valley (Ann Clwyd) was very clear about that, as she was in her praise of the tireless campaigners, which the hon. Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow (Dr Cameron) did a fantastic job of doing, too.

Bob Stewart: Cats, as Winston Churchill said, look down on us, dogs look up at us, but pigs look us in the eye as equals. I just wanted to make that point, as a dog lover more than a cat lover.

David Rutley: Madam Deputy Speaker, I will allow you to decide whether that was in order. My hon. Friend has strayed slightly from the subject of today’s discussion, but I always educate us on his views, and on those of Winston Churchill.

I cannot get away from cats because a very active member of our private office team is the proud owner of Percy, a kitten, and we have regular updates on his progress. I am grateful for the contributions to the debate, and it is important to highlight some of the work being done in the devolved areas as well. I am pleased to hear about “MacLucy’s” law; I have never heard it described as that before. We must make progress in those areas as well.

Dr Cameron: It is important that “MacLucy’s” law is taken forward across the UK, because we would not like puppy smugglers or farmers to feel that there is a safe haven anywhere. Given that so much has been put into the campaign, I ask the Minister to speak with counterparts in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland to try to make sure that this practice applies across the board.

David Rutley: Yes, I absolutely will do that. I have said that to colleagues in the context of Wales, and we will do that in Scotland as well. We need to move this forward in the United Kingdom.

I should also highlight the number of Whips who have been in the debate today—although they are not able to speak—including the Lord Commissioner of Her Majesty’s Treasury, my hon. Friend the Member for Castle Point (Rebecca Harris), and my hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes South (Iain Stewart). They are huge animal lovers and wanted to be associated with the progress we are making today.

I want to deal with some of the points made by the hon. Member for Stroud (Dr Drew) and my hon. Friend the Member for Tiverton and Honiton on sentencing and increased sentences. We remain committed to introducing the necessary legislation to increase the maximum penalty for animal cruelty from six months’ imprisonment to five years’ imprisonment, and I am working at the highest levels to ensure that the legislation needed to make the change is introduced at the earliest opportunity.

Neil Parish: Will my hon. Friend give way?

David Rutley: I will give way in just one second, because I was about to say that I am sure that those who make decisions about what goes on in this Chamber—the business managers—will listen carefully to those on the Opposition Benches and to the experienced voice of the Chair of the EFRA Committee in their calls to move this legislation forward. They have told us that they will not attempt to block this legislation, because everybody sees how important it is.

Neil Parish: I thank my hon. Friend, and that is exactly that point that I wanted to re-emphasise. There is so much cross-party support, and I cannot see why the managers of business in this House, on either side, should be worried. I know that the Minister is working hard, but please may we have this legislation sooner
rather than later? He promised us several times that this was going to be done very quickly, but I must question him gently on how quickly he means. When will it be?

David Rutley: I have never ever had any gentle questioning from my hon. Friend. As I have said, I am pressing hard to get this done as fast as we can, and our aim is to bring this forward as soon as we can.

The hon. Member for Stroud made a contribution on sentence, and the supportive contributions that my colleagues have made today show that the UK is a global leader in animal welfare. The Government’s policies on animal welfare are driven by a recognition that animals are sentient beings. We are acting energetically to reduce the risk of harm to animals, whether they are pets, on farms or in the wild, and we will ensure that any changes required to UK law after we leave the EU are made in a rigorous and comprehensive way to ensure that animal sentence is recognised. DEFRA continues to engage with stakeholders to further refine the Government’s proposals on sentence, and we are currently seeking the right legislative vehicle in this context.

The hon. Member for Stroud also made points about rescuing and rehoming centres. I hear the concerns that he expressed about these organisations. In the Westminster Hall debate on 26 February 2019 on animal rescue homes, I said that

“we must do everything we can to ensure that good welfare practices are in place in all animal rescue homes.”—[Official Report, 26 February 2019; Vol. 655, c. 74WH.]

Legitimate rescue homes do incredible work rescuing and rehoming thousands of sick and abandoned stray animals each year. We have heard praise for them in today’s debate as well. I had the honour of visiting the Mayhew rehoming centre a few weeks ago when we announced the laying of this statutory instrument, and we discussed the importance of responsible purchasing and rehoming of puppies and kittens. We want to make progress here, and we need to be confident of the benefits and impacts of any regulations placed on these organisations, particularly some of the smaller rescue and rehoming charities, which is why we are actively exploring these issues with the organisations involved.

The hon. Member for Stroud asked about resources for local authorities leading on implementing and enforcing animal licensing controls. Importantly, they have the power to charge fees, which factor in the reasonable costs of enforcement associated with licensable activity. DEFRA works closely with local authorities and the City of London leads on the training of local authority inspectors. My hon. Friend the Member for Tiverton and Honiton talked about the importance of self-policing, and it is important that we continue to get intelligence and input from the public as well. They have an important role to play.

Further contributions were made about the importance of addressing puppy smuggling. In other debates we have highlighted the need to do further work on this, and I personally and DEFRA take a zero-tolerance approach to this abhorrent crime. I know that my hon. Friend the Member for Tiverton and Honiton has talked about the number of puppies that should be allowed to come across our border at any given point in time with one owner. As I have said to him in other places, we would be in a position to review that after we leave the EU.

There was further discussion about Marc Abraham’s views on licensing and rescue homes. I am pleased that he can be with us today; it is great to see him recognised for the important campaign that he has taken forward. We agree that there is a clear difference between a legitimate charitable rehoming centre and a business selling pets. The latter will be subject to a ban on third party sales for puppies and kittens, but as I have already discussed we are seeking to regulate the rescue and rehoming sector.

Rehoming charities often charge a rehoming fee. Some have suggested that unscrupulous pet sellers could take advantage of that by reinventing themselves as rescue and rehoming organisations to get around the ban. That is why we will be working with canine and feline sector groups and local authorities to develop specific guidance to help distinguish between non-commercial rescue and rehoming centres, which are charities, and pet sellers, which are businesses.

The hon. Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow made important points about the publicity campaign that we need to take forward. We need to do further work on helping people to purchase pets responsibly, and we have committed to doing that. We have also assured the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee that we will work to provide the best advice to help people to look after their dogs and cats responsibly.

The Government are committed to protecting animal welfare. This legislation will help put an end to the inhumane and abhorrent conditions that animals such as Lucy are subjected to. It will ensure that puppies and kittens are born and reared in a safe environment with their mothers and sold from their place of birth. Those who decide to bring a pet into their home can know that it will be healthy and has come from a responsible breeder. I commend this statutory instrument to the House.

Question put and agreed to. 

Resolved,

That the draft Animal Welfare (Licensing of Activities Involving Animals) (England) (Amendment) Regulations 2019, which were laid before this House on 13 May, be approved.
4.21 pm

Martin Whitfield (East Lothian) (Lab): I beg to move, That this House has considered invisible disabilities and accessibility challenges.

I thank the Backbench Business Committee for granting this debate, my hon. Friend the Member for Newport West (Ruth Jones) for co-sponsoring the application, and the right hon. and hon. Members who will take part. I also thank the Minister who is responding; I was extremely grateful that, along with other colleagues, he spared the time yesterday to attend the roundtable discussion on this issue. We are all keen to look into this matter more closely over the coming months. I hope the Minister will agree that the roundtable was a constructive, illuminating and at times exciting discussion in which we were able to preview the new accessibility signage that reflects all disabilities, whether visible or invisible.

Before discussing the new sign and the wider campaign to improve our understanding of invisible disabilities, I want to reflect briefly on the progress that we have made as a society when it comes to people with all disabilities. The landmark legislation that I, as a Labour Member of Parliament, am particularly proud of, is the Equality Act 2010: a historic amalgamation of rights, placed under one statute, in the final days of the last Labour Government. The Act enshrined all the protections in one place for all disabled people in this country—a benchmark for our future direction of travel.

Many pieces of legislation start with an inspirational story involving an inspirational campaigner acting as a catalyst for change. One such campaigner is the reason why I stand here today to speak on this issue. Before I came into politics and before I considered standing to represent East Lothian as Member of Parliament—ever before Brexit started, believe it or not—I had the honour of being a teacher at Prestonpans Primary School. I had the great pleasure of teaching hundreds of children over the years. I truly take pride in every young person I had the privilege to teach.

One person, who has already achieved so much in her short life and is now my constituent is Grace Warnock. Grace is a passionate, articulate, intelligent and creative young person, who is determined to change the hearts and minds of people around her. She is resolute in her mission to remind everyone that not all disabilities are visible. Grace suffers from Crohn’s disease—a condition that many hon. Members will be aware of. Those with Crohn’s need more than most to use accessible toilet facilities, sometimes at very short notice. When Grace tried to use an accessible toilet some years ago, she was accosted, heckled and abused. She was targeted because Crohn’s is not a visible illness. I would not blame any young person who, after experiencing such an incident, kept their head down, possibly even avoiding accessible toilets and facilities.

Grace felt embarrassed. She was upset, but she was also determined to do something about it, so she created a toilet sign that strikes a powerful chord—one that asks people to have a heart and to consider the range of disabilities that exists. This sign, first displayed in her primary school, has spread across Scotland and is changing perceptions along the way. It is empowering people like Grace, who may feel unable to do so, to use accessible facilities, which is a great testament to Grace’s work and to her mum, Judith. The next step is to take forward the energy, the enthusiasm and the ideas of Grace’s campaign and to put forward new signage that can be a British and international standard.

That brings me to the work of another inspirational woman, Lucy Richards. Lucy is the creative director of StudioLR, and she wants to use design to take on some of society’s big challenges and to make a positive impact on people’s lives. Lucy specialises in inclusive design, creations that are simple for people to understand. Working with people with dementia and in partnership with Life Changes Trust, an incredible charity based in Scotland, she has designed a new set of everyday symbols that help people find their way around. She was inspired by Grace’s campaign, and her work includes a new symbol for people with any disability. There is a need for a sign that is easily understandable to all.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): I am sure that my hon. Friend, like me, has been contacted on many occasions by blind constituents, who have great difficulty finding their way around obstacles on the pavement. He also mentions toilets, and there is now a big shortage of toilets in the towns of this country, which may well be down to local government cuts. The Government should be looking at those two issues.

Martin Whitfield: My hon. Friend anticipates, as he so often wisely does, where my speech is going on street furniture and people with sight problems, and on the availability of toilets and facilities generally across the United Kingdom.

Yesterday I was delighted to meet the British Standards Institution, which supports the establishment of inclusive signage. Understandably, the process of standardisation is rigorous, and it is fair to say that it perhaps does not lend itself to political timetables. I am under no illusion. This is a long-term project, and there are a number of barriers that stand in the way.

Of course, because of parliamentary convention, I cannot explicitly show hon. Members the symbol. However, I am happy to preview the design after the debate. The “any disability” symbol depicts a range of disabilities, both visible and invisible, and it can be accompanied by text saying, “For people with any disability.” This is a profoundly important message that strikes at the heart of the campaign.

The nucleus of the campaign that Grace started those years ago is about changing the perception of what disability looks like. It strikes at the heart of how we define a disability. There are 13.3 million disabled people in the UK—21% of the population. If we examine the figures more closely, they reveal that 25% of those who are disabled report a mental health impairment and a further 18% have other non-visible conditions, yet I worry that what it means to be disabled is still not properly understood.

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): The hon. Gentleman is making an excellent speech on such an important issue. As chair
of the all-party parliamentary group on disability, I was approached before this debate by a number of individuals who would like me to point out that those with an autistic spectrum disorder are often overlooked or badly understood by members of the public, and such disorders are certainly not noted as a disability because they are not visible. As I know because my husband suffered a head injury while serving in the Army, head injuries can cause cognitive processing difficulties, and so on, that are not obvious. This signage is great work, and it will aid understanding of the whole range of disabilities and impairments.

Martin Whitfield: The hon. Lady raises a most profound and important point: people’s understanding of disability is influenced more by their personal experience than by what society brings together as to what it is to be disabled.

The figures show that those with non-visible disabilities suffer an unfair double attack. What sits at the heart of Grace’s campaign about having a heart and of what we hope to achieve here today and in the future is making that playing field more level and fairer. I worry about a misunderstanding of what amounts to “a disability”. Crohn’s and Colitis UK, which is leading the way in trying to change perceptions about this issue, has undertaken a huge amount of research, which shows that 93% of people think that if they challenge someone who looks healthy for using an accessible toilet, they are “standing up” for the “rights of disabled people” or doing this because the situation is not “fair” on others. One noticeable aspect of this debate is that I do not think many of the people who took part in that survey answered maliciously; they genuinely feel they are doing the right thing by pointing out to someone they do not think is disabled that they are doing the wrong thing. Their first thought is, “I want to stand up for people who are marginalised in society, those who rightly deserve full accessibility rights”. This instinctive reaction to what people believe a disability “looks like” needs to be challenged.

It is worth noting that the false perceptions of what constitutes a disability have a profound effect on the individual’s mental health. In preparing for this debate, I have been made aware of some incredibly upsetting cases of abuse directed at disabled people who have been queuing for accessible toilets or trying to use a parking bay. Further research by Crohn’s and Colitis UK shows that two thirds of people with Crohn’s or colitis have experienced an accident while they have been queuing to use a toilet, and they have, in turn, received abuse for that. Almost half say that they will change their attitude to social spaces such as restaurants because of their condition. That is just wrong, in this society; it is a damning picture of the everyday experience that disabled people suffer.

I was struck recently by an article on the impact of invisible illnesses by how hurtful people’s perceptions are. The piece noted what just an everyday misconception associated with a disability can do. We are talking about the idea, “You can’t be sick because you look so well.” There is a misconceived image of what it looks like to have one of these illnesses, and things start with a tiny casual gesture or throwaway line but then quickly evolve into something far more pernicious.

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making a powerful speech. Dementia is one of those invisible cognitive impairments. I chair the all-party group on dementia, which has just conducted an inquiry on dementia as a disability. As a society, we still face issues on access to blue badges and on attitudes and how people relate to those with dementia. I am very grateful to him for his speech today.

Martin Whitfield: I am grateful for that intervention. The Minister will find that one of my requests at the end may make reference to that point.

Let me follow up on what has been said about those who suffer acquired brain injury, as there are many instances where people feel that the person in front of them is drunk and has not suffered an injury. People who have fatigue syndromes are accused of laziness when they ask for a seat. In employment, people with these invisible conditions are often disproportionately discriminated against. Those with neurological conditions such as autism will struggle in a conventional workplace setting, but this is to miss the great opportunity and strength that people with autism can offer in the workplace.

I was interested to hear yesterday from leading charities about the impact of signage, particularly in respect of conditions that affect the functioning of the brain. Signage that vulnerable people can understand works for everybody and will go a long way towards allowing people, particularly those with dementia, to become and to feel more integrated in society. It is such small changes that go a long way towards changing the lives of significant numbers of people.

I stress that I do not want this debate, nor the introduction of new signage, to dilute the need to reform and rearrange the built environment for those who suffer from a physical disability. Wheelchair users and those with mobility challenges face huge obstacles in our society, and this is in no way an attempt to split the two groups. In fact, it is an attempt to bring them together. Whether it is the creation of more accessible homes, the altering of transport infrastructure or the forcing of private companies to improve their surroundings, it is all helpful.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): I remember that when I was trained as a dementia friend I was shocked to be informed that sometimes if a person with dementia comes across a dark rug on the floor, they get absolutely petrified because they think it is a hole. When we make public places, we have to realise that we need to be careful when we put down a dark rug or piece of carpet or whatever, because it might look like a hole to someone with dementia, and they are sometimes terrified.

Martin Whitfield: That powerful intervention shows that those people who are not suffering from dementia or do not feel that they have a disability need to think about the simple things to make the world and the community accessible to everybody in society.

We have an obligation under article 19 of the UN convention on the rights of persons with disabilities. We should continue to lead by example. Will the Minister update the House on the work the Government are doing to ensure that the UK continues to meet its international obligations? In particular, how are the Government ensuring that those with invisible disabilities
face no barriers to their day-to-day lives? How can we make sure that they can live their lives without facing abuse?

I call on the Minister to support the campaign for an easily understandable disability sign and, crucially, for there to be a standardised version of this sign that truly represents people with a wide range of visible and invisible disabilities. Once we have accepted the layout and design of a new accessible sign, we can start to progress the campaign and to consider how it can be rolled out. On that point, will the Minister consult colleagues across Government to explore the possibility of implementing such signage on our blue badge parking and disability railcards? People with a range of invisible disabilities are entitled to hold those passes. It would be a symbolic and practical change to the lives of those with such conditions if Government literature reflected the use of the new sign. I would be grateful if the Minister would agree to one further meeting with me and colleagues to discuss how we can move the matter forward.

Ann Clwyd (Cynon Valley) (Lab): I am sorry to interrupt my hon. Friend’s excellent speech. He made the point about people not recognising disability, but there are problems even when it is recognised. Tanni Grey-Thompson is a very well-known former athlete who uses a wheelchair, and she suffered terrible embarrassment on a train because of failure to access a disabled toilet. Even when someone is well known, that often does not help them if the facilities are not made available when they should be.

Martin Whitfield: Absolutely, and that is why the call for a new sign is a small request in a big argument that requires society to change its view and stop seeing people with disabilities and instead see disabled people.

I thank Lucy Richards for the work she has put into creating the new signage, and I am grateful for the support of everyone who attended yesterday’s roundtable, including my hon. Friend the Members for Newport West (Ruth Jones) and for Rhondda (Chris Bryant), the right hon. Member for Broxtowe (Anna Soubry) and the hon. Member for Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock (Bill Grant). I am also grateful for the work of the Life Changes Trust, Innovations in Dementia, Dr Gordon Hayward and Rob Turpin of the British Standards Institution. I also thank my constituent Grace for the incredible work that she has put into the campaign.

In conclusion, although we must keep ensuring that our built-up environment is fit for purpose for everyone who uses it, environmental changes go hand in hand with changing social perceptions and meeting the holistic range of accessibility challenges that individuals in our community face. I hope that hon. and right hon. Members will use this time today to note the value of changing perceptions about invisible disabilities.

This debate is about far more than just accessible signage, but symbols matter because societal attitudes reflect the way that they are interpreted. Until we start a national conversation on how we change and adapt accessibility signs to reflect any and all disabilities, we will continue to marginalise disabled people across the UK. That goes against Grace’s fundamental reason for starting this campaign: she wants society and people to have a heart.
My young son’s soft play centre of choice, Adventure Kidz in Aylesford, offers special educational needs and autism friendly sessions so that there is inclusivity even at the earliest stage in life. My son does not have autism, but he does not like hand dryers. He gets incredibly upset by them, so we find it difficult to take him into a public toilet. I therefore just have that tiny insight into what it must be like for those who do have autism to find themselves really quite unsettled by noise. Anything that public places can do to reduce that impact and that disturbance, particularly for young children with autism, is incredibly important and very welcome.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): The hon. Lady’s speech is very enlightening about many of the things we could be doing. Following on from the comments by the hon. Member for East Lothian (Martin Whitfield), does she think that one of the issues we have to overcome with invisible disabilities is not only our own ignorance of what they might be, but people’s reticence to come forward because they fear that their invisible disability might be rejected as a disability?

Tracey Crouch: I absolutely agree. I always think that one of the main advantages of being Members of Parliament is that we get exposure to issues that, ordinarily, members of the public do not. We get to learn things and to discover issues and conditions that ordinarily pass the vast majority of members of the public by. The more we can do to educate and inform people about these issues, the better. My hon. Friend the Member for Orpington (Joseph Johnson) mentioned what he had learned as a dementia friend. Like the hon. Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams), I was previously—before ministerial life—a co-chair of the all-party group on dementia. What we learn in this place about dementia is incredible, and we need to get that across to everyone.

As the chair of the partnership board, I have learned things about disabilities that I would never have come across. Some of that is just about basic education and information. Unless someone has a family member who is affected, or they themselves have a disability—physical, visible, intellectual or hidden—they do not necessarily know about these things, and they certainly do not understand them. I have tried in my speech not to use the word “understand”, because I do not think I would ever fully understand these things; I could only appreciate the challenges that people face.

It will be no surprise to anybody in the House that one of my other great pleasures in life is watching and supporting Special Olympics. I would be grateful if the hon. Member for East Lothian said, some people assume support people with Parkinson’s disease. As the hon. Member for East Lothian said, some people assume that public places can do to reduce that impact and that disturbance, particularly for young children with autism, is incredibly important and very welcome.

Special Olympics GB notes that 200 babies are born with an intellectual disability every week. Eight out of 10 of them will be bullied and all will be socially excluded. Sport dramatically enhances the psychological, physical and social wellbeing of every athlete, as well as having a positive impact on family members, who often face increased isolation and mental health deterioration.

Team GB has just returned from this year’s world games in Abu Dhabi with 169 medals, 61 of which were gold. What an amazing achievement, but what a shame it was barely mentioned. For the competitors, the world games would have been a life-enhancing moment, and for me one am trying to get some of the medal winners to come to my constituency, to go round some of my local schools and especially to meet those who share similar challenges—who knows, those athletes might even inspire them into sport in one way or another.

Sport England has been enormously helpful in recent years, and it now provides much-needed funds to get more people with physical, hidden and intellectual disabilities active. We know that those with disabilities are twice as likely to be inactive as able-bodied people. Sport England has also provided funds to Special Olympics to engage more volunteers and to support the delivery of competitions, to help it develop its commercial opportunities. However, I firmly believe we should be doing more as a state to support the Special Olympics organisation and its competitors.

When the Minister held this brief before, and I was still in my old post, we spoke of what more we could do to support Special Olympics. I would be grateful if he agreed to resume that discussion with this now humble Back Bencher and others who might have an interest. There is a real appetite for the future world games to be held here, and I see no reason why we should not support that bid in the way we did for the Olympics and the Paralympics. Imagine how brilliant it would be for our athletes who have a variety of different disabilities to compete in front of home crowds as we welcome several thousand athletes from 170 countries around the world.

Had I realised that I would have more time, I would have prepared something celebrating some of the excellent work that goes on in my constituency, in this House and beyond on having a better understanding of dementia. The hon. Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth has been doing a fantastic job in that regard. Locally, we have a dementia alliance that is trying to work with all partners to ensure that we have proper dementia-friendly communities. We have an ambition to make this place dementia-friendly, but we still have a very long way to go with that. We could start by getting rid of all the black strips and black rugs in this place.

Bradfield Academy is one of my favourite schools in my constituency. I am an honorary member of its school council. It is a special educational needs school. It has children there with extremely challenging disabilities, yet it is one of the calmest and kindest schools that I go to in my constituency.

I pay tribute to Kent Autism Trust, which is doing some brilliant work with local people and local employers to get a better understanding of autism and how we can support people with autism into the workplace and in our communities.

I would like to make special mention of those who support people with Parkinson’s disease. As the hon. Member for East Lothian said, some people assume
that people with Parkinson’s are drunk. It is one of those conditions where people think that some sort of inebriation has been involved because of their reactions. We still have a long way to go in getting a better understanding of that.

I pay tribute to the work that the Government are doing with Changing Places. I recently listened to an incredibly powerful and emotive phone-in on a local radio station about the challenges that people still face in just going into their own communities, particularly town centres, and finding it very difficult to find places to use the toilet.

Some debates in this House really influence and inspire Members to do more for their constituents, and so far this has definitely been one of them. I am genuinely inspired by the hon. Gentleman’s constituent Grace. I will take away much of what I have learned today and consider what more I can do, in addition to the work I do on physical disabilities, to support those with hidden disabilities in my own constituency and beyond.

4.52 pm

Ruth Jones (Newport West) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for East Lothian (Martin Whitfield) for instigating this debate, which I am delighted to be able to co-sponsor.

The whole point of the development of a new sign—Grace’s sign—is to be welcomed as a physical reminder that not all disabilities are visible, but also as a general encouragement to us all not to take people at face value. We need to have compassion and care for one another, as this sign reminds us. As a physiotherapist, I was well used to treating patients with disabilities that were visible because of, say, a plaster cast, crutches or a wheelchair. These are outward signs that the individual needs to be given extra consideration in a number of ways. We are all very used to seeing someone with a visual impairment using a white stick or a guide dog, and hopefully we react appropriately. This is perfectly normal.

In my previous role as a physiotherapist, I spent some time working with stroke patients, and it was my goal to help them to walk independently without the use of a stick. But my patients would often tell me that they wanted to keep the stick, even though they could walk independently, because other people knew that it signified that they may need additional time or space when walking. Certainly, in crowded areas, my patients valued the stick as an outward reminder to others that they needed to be treated with just a bit more care. So it is with people who may have invisible additional needs or disabilities.

My hon. Friend explained the origin of the planned new sign, so I do not need to repeat that, but there are others who have other invisible disabilities such as learning difficulties. I have worked with some fantastic children, young adults and adults who have learning difficulties. They do not want our sympathy; there is no need—they are getting on with their lives very well, thank you. What they need is our empathy and understanding. They may require extra help when accessing toilet facilities or a parking space for the family car close to the shops. These people look perfectly normal, whatever “normal” may be. They can walk, but some days they may not want to walk for whatever reason. Those are times when Grace’s sign would explain to the ordinary person that they need the extra space or help to ensure that they can get on with their lives.

Many people with mental health issues struggle to access public amenities at times. Their condition may fluctuate greatly, and that group of people would also benefit from Grace’s sign, to remind others that sometimes they need extra time or space when they are out and about.

I have been contacted by Jonathan Kingsley from Muscular Dystrophy UK, who reminded me that although some people with one of the 60 types of this muscle-wasting disease may be able to walk, they cannot walk far. Their ability to walk may fluctuate on a day-to-day basis, so they need to be able to park close to amenities. People with muscular dystrophy may not use a stick or wheelchair, but they cannot walk far and may require assistance when using public toilets. Again, Grace’s sign would remind the general public that people do not use disabled parking spaces or toilets unless they need to.

Sometimes people just need reminding to stop and think. They are not necessarily being unkind. Indeed, they may think they are protecting the person with genuine additional needs and stopping people using facilities inappropriately. They genuinely want to help people with disabilities, but they need to be gently reminded that not all disabilities are visible.

I hope that Members now have a better awareness of the nature of invisible disabilities. I call on the Minister to ensure that we work together on a cross-party basis to get this sign developed and implemented, perhaps at some pilot sites to start with. Ultimately, we need a sign that is universally recognised, to help the general public to better understand invisible disabilities and thus ensure that our society becomes more considerate and compassionate to all its members.

4.56 pm

Bill Grant (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Newport West (Ruth Jones). I thank her and the hon. Member for East Lothian (Martin Whitfield) for securing this very important debate.

People are often quick to form perceptions and slow to establish facts. For example, the young person not rising to give their elder a seat may in reality have a life-changing condition that genuinely prevents them from affording such a courtesy. Bowel and bladder cancer patients or persons with inflammatory bowel conditions may have undergone major surgery and be living with a stoma and discreetly concealed bag. The complexities of emptying and changing the bag in a sterile environment are difficult enough out in the community, without persons giving them the evil eye or, worse still, berating them for using an accessible toilet. Those with chronic obstructive pulmonary disease may not be at the stage of carrying an oxygen cylinder around with them, but they may nevertheless be unable to use a downstairs or upstairs toilet, opting for the accessible toilet on their level.

In 2017, the BBC’s “Newsbeat” ran an article on new signage appearing on accessible—formerly disabled—toilets, which read simply, “Not every disability is visible.” That is a fact; not every disability is visible. At that time, Tottenham Hotspur were reported to be the first football club to feature a revised sign on their accessible toilets.
Two years later, I have not observed many such signs bearing that important additional information. Charities such as Crohn’s and Colitis UK are lending their support to have the more informative signs fitted. That would not be an immense cost to many organisations in the United Kingdom and it would be a kindly thing to do for those who need a bit of extra help.

“Can’t wait!” toilet cards have been available for some time to those with incontinence. When discreetly exhibited, the card confirms to others that the holder has a medical condition and needs to use the toilet urgently. That may mean using the accessible toilet, if the other toilets are occupied or there are queues. Those who daily face the fears and stresses associated with their conditions’ symptoms and side effects from treatment should not have to face the potential additional burden of confrontation from ill-informed and often wicked, thoughtless protagonists who believe that they know better.

There is a wider issue: the availability of public toilets in general. Such facilities are on the decline throughout the UK due to financial cuts, inappropriate use by substance abusers or needless vandalism. I have had constituents contacting my office to express concern that they are becoming not quite housebound, but limited in the activities they are able to undertake outwith their homes as a result of the closure of public toilets. Their confidence is affected and there is a risk of social isolation evolving. I think that the closure of toilets is something that applies throughout the UK. We do not really realise that there are invisible victims of these closures. I was a councillor for 10 years and, yes, I too carry the burden of responsibility for being part of the closure programme in South Ayrshire.

Groups such as Inclusion Scotland work to achieve positive changes to policy and practice so that disabled people are fully included throughout all Scottish society, as they should be, as equal citizens. The Disability Rights Commission seeks to ensure that people are aware of their rights. The Government have undoubtedly enhanced legal protection under the Equality Act 2010, which was mentioned earlier. They have expanded their disability sector champions scheme, continue to roll-out their Disability Confident scheme, have announced their inclusive transport strategy and are consulting on a change to English building regulations relative to Changing Places toilets for those with profound disabilities.

However, at a time of concerns over social isolation, for those with the illnesses I have touched on, it is the basic quality of everyday life that must be our immediate focus. Will the theory of the Government policies address the real and practical issues of not being, as people say, caught short, or of having to face the indignity of being refused the use of a facility or challenged in doing so, as it was so eloquently put by the hon. Member for East Lothian (Martin Whitfield) on securing this debate. It is an important issue. It is a shame that the Chamber is so empty again because every Member of this place will have constituents who have hidden disabilities. I also congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Newport West (Ruth Jones) on her speech. She clearly has some relevant experience that she is bringing to this place.

I am pleased to be able to take part in the debate because I believe that the issue of hidden disabilities can have an immense impact on individuals’ lives. It is something we do not speak about enough in the Chamber. As some hon. Members may know from my contribution in a Westminster Hall debate earlier this year, my wife has an invisible condition—fibromyalgia—so I am well aware of how some of these conditions can be very hard to deal with. She can look perfectly okay on the outside, but she is really suffering on the inside. Fatigue can wipe out fibromyalgia sufferers for days at a time, and the pain experienced can vary from aching muscles and painful joints to extreme tenderness all over. There are cognitive challenges too, such as brain fog, insomnia and disturbed sleep. In fact, there are so many symptoms, it is not possible to list them all here. Just as with many of the conditions we have heard about today, the outside world cannot see that there is any issue at all.

My wife, like many others, has tried to find ways to manage her condition. She has to pace herself, plan ahead and make adjustments to keep her symptoms under control. That is the only way in which she can manage her condition. She does not always succeed—it still catches her out. It is incredibly frustrating and tough to know how best to help and improve things, which is why I, along with others, have called for greater awareness of the condition by the medical profession and employers so that fibromyalgia sufferers are not disadvantaged by more than their symptoms, and so that they have support out there in the world.

In common with many people with invisible, long-term and fluctuating conditions, what matters most to people with fibromyalgia is how their condition is treated and
supported. Much more research is needed on the condition and how it begins. We need consistent treatment pathways and better training for medical professionals to recognise those symptoms and recommend treatment. There is a huge need for services to be put in place to support and enable people with invisible conditions to live their lives as fully as possible.

I should like to discuss the barriers that people with invisible conditions face in their everyday life, beginning with getting back to work. I recently spoke in a Westminster Hall debate on another invisible condition, arthritis. An estimated 16,000 people in my constituency live with back pain. Another 4,000 and 8,000 people respectively are estimated to live with hip and knee conditions. Those are just some of the estimated 17.8 million people who live with arthritis or related conditions across the country. About half of them live with pain every day. That is a staggering number of people coping in their everyday lives, while people around them are blissfully unaware of their suffering. Just because we cannot see their pain does not mean that it should be ignored or written off as just how it is.

As with fibromyalgia, the problems that people with arthritic conditions face are exacerbated by the fact that they can fluctuate in severity, leaving them 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 that should not be used as cover for discrimination. Many people with arthritis want to work and can do so if the right support is in place. Such help is available through the Access to Work scheme, but that is not working as well as it should, as various arthritis charities have said. They are also 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, as we know, are obliged to make reasonable adjustments but, if someone is in work and not a member of a trade union, who will argue the case for them?

There was a Westminster Hall debate yesterday on trade union access to workplaces My hon. Friend the Member for Warrington South (Faisal Rashid) has introduced a private Member’s Bill on the issue, as some well-known employers have actively sought to prevent trade unions from accessing workplaces by banning visits or by manipulating shift patterns to prevent opportunities for engagement. It is important that we do as much as we can to ensure that people have access to trade unions at work so that they can be adequately represented. Rights are only as good as our ability to enforce them.

To return to employment opportunities for people with invisible conditions, on a practical level, how easy is it for them to raise issues associated with their condition at a job interview, or when they begin work? It is a difficult conversation to have because, although discrimination is unlawful, that does not mean that it does not happen or that it is not a difficult subject to raise at the beginning of an employment relationship. If an employer refuses to make adjustments, how realistic is it to expect people to take them to tribunal, especially without support, and what reassurance can we give them that if they raise those issues and put their head above the parapet it will not rebound negatively on them?

I want to say a few words about the challenges of employment for people with autism. In a recent survey of over 2,000 autistic adults, just over half of respondents said that they had told their current or most recent employer that they were autistic, but just under a third had not. For people with autism, busy workplaces can be socially overwhelming, or they can overload them with too much information from noisy conversations, bright lights or other sensory stimuli. Many of these barriers can be overcome quickly, easily and cheaply through increased understanding. We recently had some training here in Parliament on autism awareness—I certainly found it valuable. We can also make simple adaptations to the environment. Sadly, at the moment the National Autistic Society reports that about a third of its respondents said that support or adjustments made by their current or most recent employer, both in relation to sensory needs and to autism generally, were poor or very poor. We need to ensure that Access to Work is working effectively for autistic people and that specialist support is available throughout the country.

What about those with invisible conditions who are not well enough to work? We have talked about this issue many times, but my constituents’ experience of work capability assessments has not been good. Many decisions are overturned at tribunal and it seems to me that the system does not learn from its mistakes. A constituent of mine with two conditions I have already mentioned, arthritis and fibromyalgia, was assessed five times in eight years. At each assessment she was found fit to work. On each occasion she appealed and on each occasion she won the appeal. How can the process be wrong so many times? How can that waste of public money on five separate occasions be justified when the final decision has been the same every time? What does that say about the Government’s approach to people with long-term conditions? How many times does someone actually have to prove that they are not fit to work before it is accepted?

Debbie Abrahams: My hon. Friend is making a very powerful speech, particularly in relation to the work capability assessment. Is he aware that sanctions are more likely for people with invisible health conditions? This is a real issue that needs to be addressed.

Justin Madders: I thank my hon. Friend for her intervention. From my experience in the constituency, those with mental health issues in particular sometimes have real difficulty engaging in the process. That does, very unfairly, lead to sanctions.

Some constituents have raised concerns about the speed at which assessments are carried out and the fact that assessors do not listen to the answers given. Others have had their request for a home assessment refused, despite medical evidence being provided that they are necessary. I am thinking, in particular, of one of my constituents who has an invisible condition but was refused a home assessment. That condition was agoraphobia. Surely the need for a home assessment in those circumstances was obvious? People who enter the system deserve compassion, respect and support. They should not be made to feel that they are on trial because they are ill. I am afraid that that is the experience of so many people who come to see me about the assessments.
I want to say a few words on accessible toilets. I recently met a constituent who has a stoma, which, as I am sure Members are aware, is where the bowel is diverted through the abdomen so that bodily waste can be collected in a stoma bag. Stoma surgery is often used to treat a number of invisible illnesses, including cancer, Crohn's disease, colitis and diverticulitis. People of all ages are affected and have additional needs—for example, when using a toilet. But, as their condition is hidden, they often, as we have heard, face prejudice. There are no accurate figures on the number of people with stomas in the UK, but estimates range from 120,000 to 150,000. A lifestyle survey by Colostomy UK in 2016 of over 1,300 people with stomas found that 19% had experienced discrimination, either in the workplace, in public or elsewhere, and 30% of respondents had been challenged or criticised for using an accessible toilet. A constituent I met last week is actively campaigning in my local area to raise awareness of the needs of people with stomas. This has included encouraging local businesses and organisations to change the signage, so that accessible toilets are able to reflect the hidden nature of conditions.

We have accessible toilets here in Parliament, which have signs to remind us that not every disability is visible. I see no reason every disabled toilet could not have accessible toilet signage along the same lines.

People with a stoma have additional needs when using the toilet, which can make even a simple day trip to the shops or the supermarket extremely stressful. For many people, the first and only visible sign of their invisible illness is their dog. I recently met a constituent who has a stoma, which, as I am sure Members are aware, is where the bowel is diverted through the abdomen so that bodily waste can be monitored remotely. It is important to know that these changes cannot be implemented across the whole country.

Many people have conditions or disabilities that affect their everyday lives and they are disadvantaged by barriers in society and in the workplace. It is incumbent on all of us to do what we can to remove barriers that restrict opportunities and choices for people with disabilities, invisible or otherwise. We need to ensure that no one is held back because of these conditions, not just because we know that fairer societies are better for us all, but because everyone deserves to be treated with dignity and respect.

5.15 pm

Mary Robinson (Chendale) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders). I thank the hon. Member for East Lothian (Martin Whitfield) for securing this really important debate and for giving us the opportunity to discuss the issues that are faced by and raised by our constituents, who have disabilities both visible and invisible, which can be a barrier to their independence.

One barrier to independence should not be travel. The disability charity, Scope, in its report, “Independent. Confident. Connected.,” found that 40% of disabled people often experience issues or difficulties when travelling by train in the UK, but there has been progress in transport accessibility in recent years, driven in no small part by the Equality Act 2010. However, I would like to touch on a number of issues that disabled or impaired residents of Cheadle still face. These issues remain a real concern and I would like to see them addressed.

We are all keen to encourage people out of cars and on to public transport. It is really important that public transport recognises invisible and visible disabilities and makes the accommodations that need to be made for people to travel. Cheadle Hulme in my constituency is an important station on the rail corridor from Stoke-on-Trent and Crewe to Manchester Piccadilly, and it is well used by commuters travelling to and from my constituency for work or leisure. The construction and completion of lifts and a footbridge with funding from the Access for All programme is very much welcome, but several wheelchair users have encountered issues with the station’s disabled access and particularly the lift, which is active only until quarter to 9 in the evening, even though trains continue beyond that time. That is an important issue for people who have disabilities. Because of it, one constituent had to get off at Stockport station and get a taxi to Cheadle Hulme, which is a journey of four miles. Another—this was a really terrible experience for him—had to carry his disabled daughter and luggage down the station stairs because the lift cannot be in use 24 hours a day, as it relies on the station being manned.

I recognise that all transport companies, such as Northern, seek to address these issues and provide help for those who need assistance, but that help is often not well known about by passengers or the service is not consistent enough to adapt to the needs of disabled people. I am pleased, however, that Northern is actively looking at how to address this issue and is undertaking a pilot at another station using technology so that lifts can be monitored remotely. It is important to know that there are ways to address all these issues. Whether a person has a visible or invisible impairment or need, these issues can be addressed.

Ian Mearns (Gateshead) (Lab): The hon. Lady’s point is entirely valid, because Northern has proposed to remove guards from trains. That makes the accessibility problem even more difficult, particularly given the number of unstaffed stations on the Northern network.

Mary Robinson: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that intervention. I agree that we need to make sure that we have the right safety measures in place on all our trains, but my point is about the accessibility when people arrive at stations and the issues that they may have if a lift is not working. Clearly, we would not want a person to have to carry their disabled child up and down stairs.

Seven thousand people in the UK rely on an assistance dog to help with practical tasks and to go about their daily lives. For many people, the first and only visible sign of their invisible illness is their dog. I recently discussed this issue with Lynne from my constituency and I was distressed to hear the effect it has had on her. She was refused access to a taxi because the driver did not want the dog in her car. She suffers from regular epileptic seizures. She looks no different from any other person, but she is accompanied by her assistance dog, who connected when she was about to have a seizure. I was amazed to hear that humans emit a specific odour that some dogs can recognise, which means they can warn their owner of an oncoming seizure, sometimes a
significant period in advance, to allow them to find a safe place and get the assistance they need. My constituent was left waiting in the pouring rain for 30 minutes for another taxi after being refused passage. The taxi would not accept her assistance dog as a passenger. She reports that sometimes taxis arrive, see her dog and move on or refuse to pick her up.

Businesses such as private hire taxi firms are a vital transport service for people suffering with physical or mental conditions—they enable them to get about—and they need to be made aware of the legislation protecting people with assistance dogs. It is a concern that not enough licensing authorities require drivers to complete disability awareness and equality training, and this should include people who have disabilities that are visible and those that are not.

I am encouraged that in response to the task and finish group report, which investigated the issue, Ministers have stated that they intend to include new guidance for licensing authorities. Under the Equality Act 2010, taxi and minicab drivers cannot refuse a booking on the grounds that someone has an assistance dog accompanying them. I appreciate that in some circumstances they may not be able to have dogs as passengers in their cars—for example, if they are allergic—but that is why the legislation allows for drivers to carry certificates of exemption.

Customers must be aware of this, however, when booking a taxi so that they are not left literally out in the cold. I would like all taxi drivers to complete disability awareness and equality training so that they know they should report discrimination. We also need to take action against drivers who discriminate against disabled passengers so that experiences such as those of my constituent do not continue. This is not about forcing new regulations on business; it is about reinforcing current legislation to protect disabled people.

Like epilepsy, bowel disease is also an invisible illness. While someone may appear to look okay on the outside, they might suffer from an invisible illness such as Crohn’s or colitis and might urgently need to use a toilet when out and about.

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): I know I have just arrived in the debate, but I would like to pick up the hon. Lady’s point about Crohn’s and colitis. A close member of my family was diagnosed a few years ago with colitis, and their struggle to find public toilets and amenities and have it recognised has been a huge challenge. Does she agree that we need to raise awareness of those invisible diseases?

Mary Robinson: The hon. Lady knows from her own family experience how important this is and how seriously we need to address it. People who suffer from illnesses such as Crohn’s and colitis might urgently need to use the toilet when out and about, and we need to ensure they can and that they are accessible. It is a major anxiety for people that stops them or prevents them from going out and about. Sometimes people have to think long and hard about their journey because of the impact it might have if they need to use a toilet urgently. That is why the roll-out of accessibility signage is so important. It needs to be addressed and people need to be made aware of it. I would like this to be a bigger issue that is taken on board by more and more shops, retailers and restaurants.

A “Can’t Wait!” card is available to people with hidden illnesses—bowel disease, and so on—that they can show to staff at restaurants and shops without having to give a long explanation about their condition. In many cases, people find this embarrassing to talk about to strangers. That is the whole point of doing something about it. Some retailers are part of the “Can’t Wait!” card scheme and recognise it, but a lot of independent businesses do not, and the wider knowledge and encouragement of such schemes is needed, alongside the roll-out of more accessible signage. I would be grateful if the Minister informed the House in his closing remarks what more the Department can do to encourage businesses to recognise these schemes. Whether or not someone is disabled, their ability to go about their daily life without hindrance is a right, and one that we must ensure is respected.

5.24 pm

Angela Crawley (Lanark and Hamilton East) (SNP): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate. I am grateful to each and every one of the Members on both sides of the House who have spoken so far, but I am particularly grateful to the hon. Member for East Lothian (Martin Whitfield) for initiating this Back-Bench business debate. While—sadly—there is not much in the way of business going on in the House, I think it absolutely right that a debate of such importance take place on the Floor of the House rather than in Westminster Hall, as is so often the case.

I also thank the hon. Member for East Lothian for his passionate words about Grace and her mum Judith, and their campaign in respect of Grace’s son. In too many cases, younger and younger people are experiencing disability. The fact that across Scotland a sign can be seen saying “Not all disabilities are visible” is encouraging to many people who now feel that their disabilities are recognised.

I am grateful for the opportunity to speak up for many of my constituents who face hardship, extra costs and discrimination owing to invisible disabilities. It is extremely important for us to recognise in this place that invisible disabilities can have a powerful impact on people’s lives and livelihoods. I think that has been recognised throughout today’s debate, but we need to ensure that such conditions are fully recognised and respected in everyday society and the workplace. As we heard from the hon. Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Tracey Crouch), celebrating disability in sport is just one example of the ways in which we can ensure that society as a whole recognises the abilities that many people have, while also having a disability. The way in which society views disabilities such as dementia, Parkinson’s and autism often contributes greatly to people’s experiences of disability, and can also be stressful for the parents of young children.

There are many misconceptions about what a disabled person is “supposed” to look like, but many disabilities do not present themselves in an obvious physical way. That includes physical health conditions and neurological and mental health issues. My hon. Friend the Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow (Dr Cameron) told us that her own husband had suffered a head injury. That is another disability that is not seen every day, and I commend my hon. Friend for sharing her experience with the House.
Recently, in this place, I have been making the case that invisible conditions such as fibromyalgia and arthritis do not receive the recognition, the attention or the levels of support that they deserve. The Minister is probably tired of hearing the same voices arguing the case, but I think that Government Departments could do more to recognise not just fibromyalgia and arthritis but all the illnesses, diseases and symptoms that are not currently recognised within the departmental framework.

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): I congratulate the hon. Member for East Lothian (Martin Whitfield) on initiating the debate.

ME is another of the invisible conditions that are not receiving enough recognition. I understand that the Minister and I are to meet in an couple of weeks to discuss this very issue, but does my hon. Friend agree that such invisible conditions are often not recognised in work capability assessments? Some sort of indicator would be helpful in those circumstances.

Angela Crawley: I wholeheartedly agree with my hon. Friend. As the Minister knows, I have highlighted that issue time and again during Westminster Hall debates in relation to ME, fibromyalgia, arthritis and other lesser-known illnesses. The hon. Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders) gave his own personal account, speaking passionately, on behalf of his wife, about fibromyalgia.

What has not been covered so far today, although I assumed that we might hear about it at some point, is the fact that conditions such as anxiety and depression are also deeply misunderstood, although they are often as disabling as a physical illness. Those invisible illnesses exemplify the way in which conditions without obvious symptoms can escape the untrained eye while wreaking havoc on people’s lives, but that, too, has not been recognised by the Department for Work and Pensions.

Anxiety and depression are not easy conditions to talk about, and many men suffer quietly with symptoms because they are too afraid to speak up. I think it incumbent on everyone in the House to speak up themselves, and to ensure that people know that it is okay to ask for help. That is because, sadly, the stigma that still exists around too many illnesses can make it very distressing to have to explain and justify the additional needs to loved ones or family members, never mind employers. I know from personal experience of losing a loved one to mental ill health that it is essential that these people have the recognition and support that they deserve, because I would hate to see more people lose their lives unnecessarily.

I have also recently tried to highlight how the cuts to disability benefits by this Government are making it more difficult for disabled people to live independently and with dignity. I see the Minister roll his eyes and I appreciate that he is just one of many Ministers who have taken on this departmental responsibility and I have every sympathy as he has a large ship to steer in the right direction, but the fact of the matter is that the DWP has failed to recognise many of the disabilities today, and if we are going to sit in this House and debate the subject it is only right that we address concerns about things that reside in Government Departments.

Many diagnosed with disability and a persistent long-term health condition can be empowered and enabled to seek the support they require to live a fulfilling and long life, but the reality is that there are higher costs to living with a disability. Many are unable to work, and the difficulties they face in navigating the welfare system can be seen in all our casework. Whether the Minister is willing to acknowledge that is another matter, but it is a simple fact that if we went to any case officer in any constituency we would hear the same problems. Disabled people face overall higher costs than non-disabled people, and the cuts to their income can be devastating because they often do not have savings; they do not have a fall-back. Many do not have a support system, so what does the Minister propose they do if the last people they can turn to are this state and this Government and they are not getting the support they need? The bottom line is that shaking our head and saying it is not the case is simply not good enough. We perhaps only hear the worst of cases, but if we are just hearing some of the worst cases I dread to think how many other people do not come to us, do not know how to be advocates for themselves, and do not know how to get the support they need. I dread to think how they experience the DWP service.

Where there is a gap that is supposed to be plugged by benefits such as the personal independence payment, people instead face the blatant discrimination of a disability assessment. Is it really right that someone should face a panel of people and a medical practitioner to prove an already diagnosed medical condition? Is it really necessary when they have a diagnosed medical condition to then further prove that medical condition to other health practitioners who are often not as qualified as those who made the original diagnosis?

The system is not working for people who need help, and that is because of the ideology of this austerity-driven Government. They are ultimately cutting on the backs of the poor. In 2016 the Government introduced regulations which specifically excluded people with psychological conditions from receiving higher points in PIP assessments. I appreciate that that was not under the Minister’s stewardship, but consecutive Ministers who have had responsibility for this area have failed to address these systemic issues.

It took a defeat in the courts for the DWP to overturn this practice. Is it right that public money should be spent trying to defend the indefensible? That demonstrates the direction of the Government, their perspective on disabled people, and their contempt for their additional needs. The DWP looks at the needs of disabled people at arms’ length, with assessments contracted to a private company.

While I appreciate that some of the assessors are highly skilled medical professionals who have the empathy required to work in a clinical setting, this is not always the case. Numerous constituents have complained to me of assessors who did not understand their illness and who could not imagine how difficult life is on a bad day with fibromyalgia or depression. They were simply not listened to, and the report they received simply did not reflect their experience of the assessment. Assessors are simply not trained in spotting these illnesses, and that is reflected in the points awarded in their assessment reports. The result is that people in genuine need either have to put up and shut up or they challenge the
outcome through a gruelling mandatory reconsideration and appeals process. The very fact that the outcomes are often overturned at that stage implies that there is a systemic problem with the system. This is a flawed system that needs to be reviewed urgently, and I urge the Minister to take that action.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): My hon. Friend is making an excellent point about PIP assessments. Epilepsy Scotland says that 77% of those who appealed when they lost out on their PIP won on appeal. The DWP denied PIP to over 53% of people living with epilepsy who had previously had DLA, so this absolutely bears out my hon. Friend’s point that those with particular conditions such as epilepsy are not being well served by the system.

Angela Crawley: I wholeheartedly agree. Fundamentally, this is all I want the Minister to take home today. I genuinely want us to be able to work cross-party across the House to get this right, because this is not simply about levelling this at the Government. We all have a responsibility to make the system work better.

As the Minister knows, I am a member of the Women and Equalities Committee, and we have consistently argued that more can be done to support disabled people. I think he would agree that there is always more that we could do within the built environment to support those with a disability. It is often not the disability itself that disabling; it is the built environment and the structures within society that disable the individual.

Bill Grant: Is it not the case that the Scottish Government had the opportunity to recreate a Scottish social security system? The hon. Lady has spent some time berating the current system, yet the opportunity was gifted to the Scottish Government, as it should have been, through devolution.

Angela Crawley: The hon. Gentleman knows fine well that there is a Scottish social security service, and the approval ratings and general success of the implementation of that system provide evidence that where this is done correctly and with an ethos of integrity and respect, it works far better than an interrogative system that implies that people must prove that they are disabled. Frankly, I would expect more from the hon. Gentleman, who often makes the case in this House about levelling this at the Government. We all have a responsibility to make the system work better.

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Once more, I call on the Government to define specifically what “reasonable adjustments” are, because too many employers are unable to provide the level of support required because “reasonable adjustments” have not been exactly defined. For that matter, the Equality Act 2010 is often not being enforced, particularly across Government Departments and in outside bodies that are accountable to the Government. There is more that the Minister can do to ensure that the Equality Act works for people and that the definition of “reasonable adjustments” is clear so that employers can support people.

We need to have a shift in the way we look at disability in this country. We should commend the companies and employers who are making the changes needed to help disabled people to continue into work, but we also need to ensure that the people who require welfare support are actually receiving it and not being excluded owing to processes that are not fit for purpose. The Minister has heard me make these asks several times, and I know that he is probably tired of hearing me make them, but I urge him to speak to his colleagues across the Departments—specifically, given his remit, to the Department for Work and Pensions—and to champion reforms with those disabilities in mind. If the true measure of a society can be found in how it treats its weakest members, right now we are coming up short. So, before yet another reshuffle and yet another Prime Minister, I urge this Minister to make a lasting impact and improve the lives of disabled people.

5.38 pm

Mrs Sharon Hodgson (Washington and Sunderland West) (Lab): This has been a fantastic, high-quality debate. It is a shame that the attendance was a bit—[Interruption.] Yes, it is quality over quantity, which is what we tend to find at the moment. Perhaps other things are going on and focusing minds elsewhere. I would like to begin by thanking my hon. Friends the Members for East Lothian (Martin Whitfield) and for Newport West (Ruth Jones) for securing the debate and for their excellent and passionate opening speeches. They both mentioned Grace and her “have a heart” campaign. That is a fantastic example of a lived experience-led campaign, and they are often the most powerful and successful. I join my hon. Friends in commending Grace and her campaign, which I wish widespread success.

At this juncture, I also want to mention the Changing Places campaign, which I have been involved with in my constituency on behalf of a constituent whose son has spina bifida. I was shocked to find out how few facilities there are across my constituency: no doubt the same applies to all constituencies.

I thank all hon. Members who have taken part today, including the hon. Members for Chatham and Aylesford (Tracey Crouch) and for Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock (Bill Grant)—[Interruption.] I am going to crucify all these constituency names with my Geordie accent. I also thank my hon. Friend the Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders)—I just about managed that one—and the hon. Member for Chaddle (Mary Robinson), as well as the hon. Member for Lanark and Hamilton East (Angela Crawley), who spoke for the SNP. I thank them all for their excellent speeches.

Members may have noticed that I am not a Department for Work and Pensions shadow Minister—I am shadow Public Health Minister—but I am happy to be closing this debate on behalf of my hon. Friend the Member for Battersea (Marsha De Cordova). I do chair the all-party parliamentary group on dyslexia and other specific learning difficulties. Those are also, of course, invisible disabilities; I shall come back to that aspect later.

As we have heard, in the last census, one in five people in the UK reported having a disability or limiting long-term health condition. The vast majority of disabled people have hidden impairments not immediately obvious to others—neurodiversity, Crohn’s disease, colitis, dementia, arthritis, or mental distress and energy impairment conditions such as myalgic encephalomyelitis, or ME, and chronic fatigue syndrome, to name but a few.

According to Scope, nearly half the British public are not aware that they even know someone who has a disability. People with invisible impairments face attitudinal
barriers in every part of their lives, from accessing public toilets to using disabled parking bays, but I will concentrate mainly on education, access to social security and employment.

People with invisible disabilities often face significant exclusion and stigma in education. For example, the lack of awareness of autism in schools affects autistic students at every level. As a result, fewer than half of children and young people on the autism spectrum say that they are happy in education. SEND provisions are woefully inadequate and have been devastated by brutal cuts to our schools and sixth forms, worth £2 billion per year.

What assessment has the Minister made of the impact funding cuts have on children with autism and their ability to stay in mainstream schools? The issue is about accessibility and access to the curriculum. Autistic children are sometimes forced to wait for more than a year for the SEND support that they need, and just one in 10 parents is satisfied by the education, health and care plan for their child. As I know, children with dyslexia and other specific learning difficulties experience that, too: my son is severely dyslexic, and as I mentioned earlier, I am the chair of the APPG on dyslexia and other specific learning difficulties.

Earlier this year, our group released a report entitled “The Human Cost of Dyslexia—the emotional and psychological impact of poorly supported dyslexia”. It outlined the ways in which missed or poorly supported dyslexia during education has made such children feel stupid, unvalued by society, guilty—as if the problem was their fault—and disinterested in education. The implications can lead to under-achievement at every level of education, in careers and work life thereafter and, at the extreme end, to disengagement from society. That is reflected in the fact that there are proportionately more people with dyslexia in the criminal justice system than among the general population. The same can be said for a number of SEND conditions.

Unfortunately, the issues faced by people with invisible disabilities during childhood do not disappear but actually worsen in adulthood. The employment gap between disabled people and non-disabled people is 30.1 percentage points and has remained just above 30 percentage points for the past decade. This is something that the last Labour Government were trying to tackle. We had the Valuing People Now partnership boards—before he had to dash to a meeting, my hon. Friend the Member for Gateshead (Ian Mearns) told me that he chaired the successful board in Gateshead—but, sadly, the coalition Government scrapped them in 2012. Three years later, in 2015, the Government pledged to halve the disability employment gap to 15 percentage points. [Interruption.] The Minister is getting frustrated.

The Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work (Justin Tomlinson): Does the hon. Lady not welcome the fact that just short of 1 million more disabled people were in work in the past five years alone and that, for the first time ever, which I emphasise, more than half of disabled people are now in work? We have made significant progress. There is much, much more to do, but we are in a significantly better position than we were in 2010.

Mrs Hodgson: I am sure the Minister will be making all those points in his contribution.

The Government pledged to halve the disabled employment gap to 15 percentage points in 2015, but the 2017 Conservative manifesto set a new target to get an extra 1 million disabled people into work by 2027, which is a much downgraded commitment. If that is not the case, will the Minister please clarify the Government’s target and update us on the progress on closing the employment gap? The National Audit Office released a damning report concluding that the DWP lacks any clear measures to support disabled people into work. [Interruption.] It is about accessibility. I cannot see how it is not about this debate.

What will the Government do to ensure that clear measures are put in place to support disabled people, including those with invisible disabilities, into work? A recent TUC survey found that more than two thirds of respondents say there is more stigma for disabled people when their impairment cannot be seen by others in the workplace.

For example, people with autism often face significant stigma and difficulty in work. According to the National Autistic Society, just 16% of autistic adults are in full-time employment, compared with 80% of non-disabled people who are in work in the UK. The vast majority of autistic people face a hostile environment in the labour market, and there is an appalling lack of understanding of autism among jobcentre staff, disability employment advisers and some employers. The same goes for the police and the criminal justice system, which can lead to autistic people being wrongfully arrested when their only crime is being autistic. What will the Government do to ensure better understanding of autism across society?

The Government’s Disability Confident scheme lacks any credible performance measures to ensure that employers support disabled people into work, and it is possible to reach level 3 accreditation without actually employing a single disabled person. Is that something the Government will review?

People with fibromyalgia, which as we have heard is an invisible disability affecting up to 1 million people in the UK, also fall victim to barriers in the labour market. Under this Government, fibromyalgia sufferers face a lack of proper understanding of their condition, as we heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston, as well as a lack of vital in-work support. Only 63% of people with musculoskeletal conditions are in work, with many forced out of work by the difficulties of daily life due to their invisible disability.

The Access to Work scheme could play a vital part in ensuring that employers provide valuable reasonable adjustments in the workplace for people with invisible disabilities. However, a survey conducted by Versus Arthritis found that just 59% of respondents with conditions such as fibromyalgia and only 41% of employers are aware of the scheme. What steps can the Minister take to ensure that employers are aware of the scheme and to encourage take-up?

As we have heard during the debate, assessments for PIP, employment and support allowance and universal credit are failing people with invisible impairments such as mental health problems and mental distress. The Time to Change campaign has reported that 90% of people with mental distress have experienced stigma,
including in employment and in accessing social security support. The current assessment framework fundamentally discriminates against people with mental distress, and I am sure that we will all have constituents who have experienced this and felt overwhelmed by the process. The process begins with an arduous written assessment, which is 34 pages long in the case of PIP. That is followed by the collation of medical evidence, which can involve travelling extensively, liaising with different health services and facing huge expense. Finally, there is an often invalidating and often humiliating face-to-face assessment.

In 2013, an upper tribunal panel said that the design of the work capability assessment substantially disadvantaged mental health claimants, as it relied upon the self-reporting of a disability. In 2017, the Government changed the eligibility criteria for the PIP mobility component, to exclude certain people undertaking journeys who are facing “overwhelming psychological distress”. These changes, which were ruled to be unlawfully discriminatory by a High Court and which will take years to complete, prove, once again, the DWP’s shocking disregard for the rights of people with invisible disabilities. I hope that the Minister expect to have reviewed all these cases?

The Government have only reviewed 10% of cases. When does the Minister think it is reasonable to demand that he be coming forward. I had further luck, as the various petrol stations had a little of the right kind of tea. I had a stroke of luck, because on Saturday a Red Box was dispatched to my house. We knew this debate was coming up, so a 3,500-word draft speech was prepared and there was a lot of briefing on what subjects would be covered. I thought that the best thing to do was to pop the kettle on, have a cup of tea and look at something else first. As I did so, I found an invitation to a meeting of the all-party group on this very subject on Tuesday. As a matter of luck, I was therefore able to attend a brilliant meeting to discuss exactly what would be coming forward. I had further luck, as the various areas of priority for us were then connected to three further meetings I had later in the week, prior to this debate, and I will be covering all those in a little more detail.

There is a huge amount of respect for the hon. Gentleman, who has built a brilliant reputation in this area for a long time, both in his role before he came to the House and in the House. He is widely respected and he is right to recognise the progress that has been made since the Equality Act 2010. I pay tribute to the Labour party for its work in that area. Our Government has rightly continued, as I am sure all future Governments will, to work with stakeholders to build on that incredibly important step, which does make a real difference.

The hon. Gentleman is right to highlight that we need to improve awareness. He talked about how 93% of people who challenge feel that they are doing the right thing because they want to stand up for those who are marginalised in society, and I am acutely aware of that point. This was summed up by an incident I saw where someone with disabled autistic daughter parked in a disabled parking space, with a blue badge, yet received abuse.

It was not a one-off—I am sure it happens all over the place. On that stat—93% of people would challenge someone—they probably feel that they are doing the right thing, but because of the lack of awareness and the additional challenges of hidden disabilities, society is creating awkwardness and putting people off and that is affecting people’s lives.

I shall come shortly to Grace, the inspiration, but first let me whizz through some of the excellent speeches and respond to them directly. My hon. Friend the Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Tracey Crouch) has done brilliant work, both in her constituency with the partnership board and in her former role as everybody’s favourite sports Minister. When I was previously a disability Minister, we worked together carefully to push organisations such as the Premier League, which I know, was, to its credit, very proactive. Richard Scudamore, the departing chief executive, took a personal interest in improving disability access in premier league stadiums. I could not have asked for more support from the sports Minister in that policy area.

My hon. Friend was absolutely right to highlight the importance of the Special Olympics. The point that I really picked up on was just how happy people are—in all the visits in my 19 years as an MP, a Minister and a councillor, nothing has come close to the joy that I saw when I went to a learning disability netball session. I literally thought that the young adults were going to explode with excitement. I am glad that my hon. Friend also took the time to highlight the work of my hon. Friend the Member for Daventry (Chris Heaton-Harris), who has done a huge amount in this policy area.

The hon. Member for Newport West (Ruth Jones) has made a good impression since her recent arrival in the House, from which we are all benefiting. This is the second debate to which she has contributed and I have responded. She brings real-life experience in this area, particularly in respect of strokes, and it was really important to highlight that. She reminds us how important it is that we do this because some people will need extra time and space. That is crucial.

My hon. Friend the Member for Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock (Bill Grant) led a brilliant Westminster Hall debate just a few weeks ago and carried on today in the same form. Not every disability is visible. He was right to highlight that there is not an immense cost to making a real difference in this policy area. That came through in many speeches, and I will cover it in more detail later. Through the direct experiences of his wife, the hon. Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders) raised some incredibly important points about access to
work and sanctions. He has raised them before in other debates and he always raises them in a constructive manner. I want to try to keep to the spirit of the debate, so I offer him a personal meeting so that we can explore the issues in more detail and do them justice.

My hon. Friend the Member for Cheadle (Mary Robinson) was absolutely right to highlight the challenges in respect of public transport, an area on which she has worked tirelessly. She also raised the issue of assistance dogs, on which British Guide Dogs has been one of the best and most visible campaigning charities, particularly in respect of the misunderstanding of what taxi drivers should or should not do and how we can tighten things up through licensing. My hon. Friend was also right to highlight the brilliance of medical dogs that can smell certain conditions—it is the equivalent of detecting one particle in a swimming pool, which is absolutely amazing. What a difference we can also make in the retail environment, which I will cover a little later.

Perhaps the hon. Members for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson) and for Lanark and Hamilton East (Angela Crawley) did not quite follow the spirit of the debate—that is one of the challenges when one arrives with a pre-written speech. I gently say to them that we are spending £55 billion a year on supporting those with long-term health conditions and disabilities. That is a record amount and is up £10 billion. Only 16% of DLA claimants had the highest rate of support, compared with 32% of those on PIP. Disability employment is at a record high: in respect of our target in 2027, we are at 440,000 after two years. As I said in an intervention earlier, for the first time we have more disabled people in work than not in work. There is still more to do, though, specifically for people with autism in jobcentres. I am grateful for the work of Autism Alliance UK, which helped to create the autism toolkit. In the spirit of the debate, I am happy to meet both Members to discuss all those issues in detail, but will keep to the theme—

Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP) rose—

Justin Tomlinson: Let me keep to the spirit of the debate.

This debate has happened because of Grace Warnock, a truly inspirational superstar who had a fantastic teacher, who can take some credit for starting this brilliant journey. She is an amazing young person dealing with the challenges of Crohn’s disease. She was targeted with abuse because of her hidden disability. Understandably, many people, including many of us, would have shied away. I am sure that, day in, day out, people are shying away, but she stood her ground and she has made a difference. We should all celebrate her courage. I am very proud that she was awarded the Prime Minister’s Points of Light award in 2018—the very least that we can collectively do to celebrate her brilliance. It is absolutely right that her energy, enthusiasm and ideas are used to drive us forward.

Sence sent us all a briefing in which it summed up why we should listen carefully to Grace. It said that many public facilities are not currently fully accessible. Many people have multiple complex and/or invisible disabilities and require greater support and accessibility in order to access the local community, but these facilities are often not provided. Change could include the invisible disability sign, greater Changing Places provisions, improved accessible public transport and greater staff awareness for people working in public places. Greater provision of such facilities would lead to better inclusion and help to improve attitudes towards disabled people. Every one of us in this place would agree with every word of that.

That brings me to the all-party group meeting that I attended only yesterday. It was fantastic to see such cross-party support and some really impressive individuals making a difference in an area which, as the hon. Member for East Lothian rightly highlighted, is complex. We all agree that we want Grace’s sign to be a stepping stone to improved signage that is internationally recognised but, as ever, it is not simple. Everything in the political environment takes a little bit longer than perhaps we would like. To get international recognition of a new symbol involves a process with various stages from the initial proposals, through to consensus building, public consultation and publication. It can take a number of years, but that does ensure that, when it is done, it is done properly and is of long standing.

In our country, the British Standards Institution, the UK national standards body, in effect audits and approves something before it is considered by the International Organization for Standardization. The APPG gave an update and a presentation on the work that is being done and I was thrilled that the BSI was fully involved and fully supportive. It is right to highlight those people, beyond the MPs on the APPG, who have done so much work. Lucy Richards, the designer, has taken on Grace’s idea to international stellar levels. I was incredibly impressed by that. Having run a marketing company, it gave me a warm glow to remember the joys of looking at designs. There has been support from Life Changes through Anna Buchan, who provided the funding needed to carry out that extensive work. I should also mention user experts such as Dr Gordon Hayward, Steve Milton and Robert Turpin from the BSI. We had all the movers and shakers making sure that this has been fully road tested, so that when we are ready to take it to the international standards organisation it will tick all of the boxes. I thank the hon. Member for Newport West (Ruth Jones), the right hon. Member for Broxtowe (Anna Soubry), the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) and my hon. Friend the Member for Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock (Bill Grant), who were all present and supportive of that vital work. I will do everything that I can to support that going forward.

I did say that I was lucky with the other meetings that came up. This week, I met various sector champions who are helping to represent all of us to challenge those particular areas to do more and to highlight best practice. The first of those was retail sector champion Samantha Sen. Many of the speakers today have talked about the importance of getting it right in retail. That highlights the fact that this is a win, win. This is not just for those with hidden disabilities. If retailers can get it right, they can access the combined spending power of disabled people, which stands at £249 billion—those 13 million disabled people have considerable spending power.

Seventy-five per cent. of disabled people and their families have left a shop because of poor customer service. I do not believe that there is a single retailer who wakes up in the morning and says, “I want to turn away business.” I do not think that, on any of our visits, we
have ever had a retailer saying, “I have too much business. Please do less.” I had the pleasure this morning of speaking at and opening the Retail Forum, at which many of the leading retailers and estate owners—including British Land and the Crown Estate—were present. They absolutely buy into this. They have a real appetite for sharing best practice. It is being channelled through the Purple Tuesday campaign, which many MPs support. On 12 November, we will have a genuine focus on this issue. When they set that up, they expected 70 retailers to be involved; it was actually over 700, and this year they expect it to be over 900. That is making a difference in retail and I commend all those retailers for being so engaged.

I also met Stephen Brookes, who is our transport sector champion. Many people will have worked with him on his brilliant work to tackle disability hate crime, which made a real difference to the Government’s way of going forward. He has real expertise; he initially started with the challenges on the Blackpool buses and spread out to rail and buses across the whole country. Part of the way through our conversation—this was amazing—I said I had been to an all-party parliamentary group that was looking at how we can improve signage. I said, “One of the things I would like you to do is to meet the members of the APPG to give your expertise.” He said, “I have got something to show you. I have seen a sign that is amazing.” and he brought out the sign that had been presented at the all-party parliamentary group. He has confirmed that he would be delighted to support the APPG’s work. That will build on the Government’s new inclusive transport strategy to create a transport system that provides equal access for disabled people by 2030. That is a really important area, because disabled people should be able to travel confidently, easily and without extra cost.

Stephen Brookes reassured me that, over the last three years, there has been a complete shift, particularly with the rail companies and providers such as Network Rail. Any of their major improvements now have to go through their built environment access panel, for which there is a pan-disability group, to make sure they get things right. He explained to me that they get them right at the beginning—it is a lot easier to do that than it is to retrospectively fix things. I was encouraged that so many providers have understood the importance of this issue.

I also met Andrew Miller, who is our arts and culture sector champion. He, again, talked about the huge progress that is being made in our cultural venues and our live music venues. I pay tribute to Attitudes is Everything, one of my favourite charities, which makes live music venues accessible. When I was first a disability Minister, and I insisted on having a picture of Attitudes is Everything, my officials airbrushed out the pint glasses some of its members were enjoying as part of their evening entertainment, saying that that probably was not right for a ministerial wall. I got that corrected and the picture was put back in place.

I understand the importance of this issue, given that my first graduate job was as a nightclub manager. 

**Interruption.** There are not many who could say that.

**Interruption.** Mr Deputy Speaker has suggested that that was maybe because I liked dancing; actually, I was probably a manager because I was not very good at dancing. Andrew Miller and I talked in detail about what more all these venues, which an individual may visit only once or twice, could do. Many now put a lot of additional information up in advance on their websites so that users can check. What disabled users do not want to do is travel all the way to a venue and be left red faced when the facilities are not accessible.

I had a look at a website, which looked, in theory, like it was following good practice. It talked about free admission for carers or helpers; free loan of a wheelchair or motorised scooter; providing a personalised guiding scheme for unaccompanied disabled people, as long as it was booked in advance; subtitled video and large print being available; low-level counters; the induction loop system; and guide, hearing and assistance dogs being welcome. However, there was not a single point of contact, and probably the most important thing that any retailer or leisure provider can do is make it crystal clear that there is one. Those with disabilities do not fit into a neat box—everybody has their own unique challenges—and being able to talk things through and knowing where to go if there is a problem can make a real difference. It can also benefit facilities, which can then tap those 13 million customers with their £249 billion.

Finally, I met Huw Edwards, who is our physical activity and leisure sector champion. As my hon. Friend the Member for Chatham and Aylesford highlighted the importance of sport, I pay tribute to Sport England for doing lots more to focus on opportunities for those with disabilities, recognising the importance of sport and physical activity for disabled people through the Sporting Future strategy. I welcome the fact that we are seeing increases in activity. Again, there is still lots more to do, but it is right that we promote opportunities and share best practice. So many want to do more but need this information.

As I initially indicated with my triple yes, I am keen to do everything I can, as quickly as possible, to get this. I was blown away yesterday when I saw the designs and the right balance of the imagery, dealing with all the competing demands across the pan-disability spectrum and getting more detail with the words. I think this will make a real difference. As was said, not all things have to cost a huge amount of money. On this issue, everybody will do everything they can to make sure that Grace’s brave stand really does make a difference, not just in the UK but internationally.

It has been a real pleasure to take part in such a constructive and positive debate. Parliament is at its best today.

6.10 pm

**Martin Whitfield:** It is right to say that we have seen Parliament at its best today. There are many distractions—shall we call them?—that take up political time. I know that Members from all parts of the House are doing other work today. Nevertheless, over 50 Members from across the whole House supported the application for this Backbench Business debate. It is right that the message should go out from here today that this is a cross-party ask and a cross-party right. I go back to the discussion about symbols: it is a symbol of how important this place feels our disabled community are, because they are an essential part of our society and we are stronger for them.

I thank all the Members who spoke and intervened. I finish with the words of the hon. Member for Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock (Bill Grant)—my hon. Friend—
although not the ones he may think I will finish on. He said that this is the kind thing to do. As Grace said, it is about letting people have a heart about our whole society.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered invisible disabilities and accessibility challenges.

Business without Debate

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

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

CRIMINAL LAW

That the draft Justice and Security (Northern Ireland) Act 2007 (Extension of duration of non-jury trial provisions) Order 2019, which was laid before this House on 30 April, be approved.—(Amanda Milling.)

Question agreed to.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): With the leave of the House, we shall take motions 6 to 8 together.

HIGH SPEED RAIL (WEST MIDLANDS – CREWE) BILL

Ordered,

That the High Speed Rail (West Midlands – Crewe) Bill Committee shall have leave to sit twice on the first day on which it shall meet.

CHURCH REPRESENTATION AND MINISTERS MEASURE

Ordered,

That the Measure passed by the General Synod of the Church of England, entitled Church Representation and Ministers Measure (HC 2167), be referred to a Delegated Legislation Committee.

BUSINESS OF THE HOUSE

Ordered,

That at the sitting on Wednesday 12 June, 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.—(Amanda Milling.)

PETITIONS

School Funding

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): We now come to the petitions. I hope that Mr Gwynne is not going to read the individual names out.

6.12 pm

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. I rise—with a bad back—to present a petition organised by my formidable constituents, Megan Montgomery, Amanda Baxter and the parents and supporters of Vale View Primary School in Reddish.

Vale View is one of 26 schools across England where it is proposed to close early on a Friday in order to cut costs. According to the independent School Cuts campaign, Vale View, like every other school in the borough of Stockport, has seen a massive reduction in funding since 2015. At Vale View, it is £430,122, or a £446 per-pupil drop in funding. This is not on. I support the parents in their protest and take pride in presenting their mammoth petition. I hope that Ministers take note of the strength of feeling on this issue and act.

The petition reads:

The petition of parents, families and carers of pupils at Vale View Primary School, Reddish,

Declares that Vale View Primary School, Mill Lane in Reddish is trying to close early on Friday afternoons to save money meaning that parents will either have to leave work early to pick their children up, or pay for child care in school; further that it will disrupt children’s learning; further that Vale View is not the only school proposing this; further that schools across the country are affected thanks to real terms funding cuts of £2.5bn; further that schools are being asked to make cuts to staffing, drop subjects and other activities and are asking parents to chip in to help run them; further that we think it’s ridiculous that in 2019 schools are being forced to shut their doors early, or cut entire subjects because the government won’t give them the money they need; further that investment in schools is investment in our children’s future; further notes a related online petition—now printed out—on this same matter that has received 113,610 signatures; and further that the government should be doing everything it can to make sure children in England have the best start in life and the best education to help them succeed.

The petitioners therefore request the House of Commons to ask the government to increase funding for schools, so they can afford the staff and equipment they need without taking cost saving measures like cutting school hours.

And the petitioners remain, etc.

Nnamani family, Glasgow

6.15 pm

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): I think the hon. Member for Denton and Reddish (Andrew Gwynne) needed a manual handling course or risk assessment before presenting that petition.

I rise on behalf of the residents of Glasgow South West, who are among the most sophisticated electorates in these islands. They have organised a petition on behalf of Mary Nnamani and her family, who are well known to the constituency office staff, charities in Glasgow South West and the Church community. I want to pay particular tribute to the Hastie family and the parishioners of Our Lady and St George’s, who have helped to organise this petition of 387 signatures over one week.

The petition states:

The petition of residents of Glasgow South West, who are among the most sophisticated electorates in these islands. They have organised a petition on behalf of Mary Nnamani and her family, who are well known to the constituency office staff, charities in Glasgow South West and the Church community. I want to pay particular tribute to the Hastie family and the parishioners of Our Lady and St George’s, who have helped to organise this petition of 387 signatures over one week.

The petition states:

The petition of residents of Glasgow South West

Declares that Mary Nnamani and her family who fled from Nigeria in danger of their lives have become a full and valued part of our community in Glasgow through our schools and Church Community; further that the Nnamani family have claimed asylum here and we would dearly love them to stay.

The petitioners therefore, request that the House of Commons urges the Home Office to grant Mary Nnamani and her family the right to remain in this country, where they have claimed asylum.

And the petitioners remain, etc.

[Po002459]
**Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP):** Further to my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens), I rise in support of Mary Nnamani and her children. I pay tribute to the parishioners of Our Lady and St George’s who have gathered this petition. It is clear from their support that this is a valued family within the community. Glasgow is their home, and the community very much want them to stay. It is greatly frustrating to see further Home Office misery put upon the people of Glasgow. I would like to thank those from my constituency who have signed the petition, and particularly Grace Buckley, who is incredibly active in Glasgow in supporting human rights causes in the city and around the world.

The petition reads:

The petition of residents of Glasgow Central
Declares that Mary Nnamani and her family who fled from Nigeria in danger of their lives have become a full and valued part of our community in Glasgow through our schools and Church Community; further that the Nnamani family have claimed asylum here and we would dearly love them to stay.

The petitioners, therefore, request that the House of Commons urges the Home Office to grant Mary Nnamani and her family the right to remain in this country, where they have claimed asylum.

And the petitioners remain, etc.

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**Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP):** I want to add my congratulations to and admiration of the parishioners of Our Lady and St George’s in Penilee, who have so efficiently organised this petition, and particularly my constituents among their number who have signed it. The case of Mary Nnamani and her family clearly demonstrates that the hostile environment is alive and well. I hope that this and so many other cases will be urgently reviewed and that that policy will eventually come to an end.

The petition states:

The petition of residents of Glasgow North
Declares that Mary Nnamani and her family who fled from Nigeria in danger of their lives have become a full and valued part of our community in Glasgow through our schools and Church Community; further that the Nnamani family have claimed asylum here and we would dearly love them to stay.

The petitioners, therefore, request that the House of Commons urges the Home Office to grant Mary Nnamani and her family the right to remain in this country, where they have claimed asylum.

And the petitioners remain, etc.

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**Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op):** I rise in solidarity with the hon. Member for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens) and all his constituents, particularly the parishioners of Our Lady and St George’s in Penilee. As we see so often, it is churches that are performing the role in the community of providing solidarity, sustenance and moral support to so many people in our communities who are victims of the oppressive behaviour of the Home Office. The Home Office is denying the basic rights of justice and sanctuary to those who have fled to this country seeking asylum, and who are often facing the worst possible conditions and psychological torment. It is great that this act of solidarity across parties and across the city of Glasgow can, I hope, bring some degree of encouragement and, thankfully, some respite to a family who are facing such torment at this point in time.

I present this petition on behalf of the constituents of Glasgow North East. The petition reads:

The petition of residents of Glasgow North East,
Declares that Mary Nnamani and her family who fled from Nigeria in danger of their lives have become a full and valued part of our community in Glasgow through our schools and Church Community; further that the Nnamani family have claimed asylum here and we would dearly love them to stay.

The petitioners, therefore, request that the House of Commons urges the Home Office to grant Mary Nnamani and her family the right to remain in this country, where they have claimed asylum.

And the petitioners remain, etc.
Funeral Plans: Regulation

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

6.21 pm

Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): I am grateful to you, Mr Deputy Speaker, and to Mr Speaker for granting me this opportunity to raise the important issue of funeral plan regulation again in the House. Much has changed since the last time I brought a debate on funeral plan regulation to the Chamber. I will go into more detail regarding what has happened in the industry shortly, but first I want to explain why this is such an important issue and why action is so important.

Pre-paid funeral plans allow consumers to save for a funeral. If they are sold and handled appropriately, they are a good thing. They allow people to purchase a funeral and secure it at today’s prices. They can avoid the double-whammy shock of losing a loved one and dealing with the financial consequences of a funeral at the same time. Alongside appropriate regulation of the funeral industry itself and the wider anti-poverty work that is required, funeral plans are the best route to avoiding funeral poverty.

I proposed a ten-minute rule Bill in December 2016, as I want to see better regulation of this market. The debate in 2016 followed a report from Citizens Advice Scotland that same year, commissioned by the Scottish Government, on funeral poverty. It made a series of recommendations regarding the action required to stop funeral poverty. Many of them were devolved responsibilities that are now being pursued by the Scottish Government, but some were issues reserved to Westminster, including this one of the regulation of funeral plans. That report, with its case studies of people being mis-sold funeral plans, and representations made to me by constituents prompted me to ask this Government whether they should be doing more. According to UK Government figures, about 200,000 funeral plans are sold each year, and I expect that figure to continue to rise.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Neil Gray: By all means. [Interruption.]

Jim Shannon: Mr Deputy Speaker, I did seek the hon. Gentleman’s permission beforehand, so I have done this the right way.

I congratulate the hon. Gentleman, who so often brings to an Adjournment debate many important political issues that we are all involved in and which I am aware of as well. I know of many people who immediately began a funeral payment policy when they retired, yet that has proved to be a negative move for many families. Particular cars, coffins or flowers that were chosen for sentimental reasons, for example, were not delivered, although people thought they had paid for them. There have been widespread reports of bad sales practices such as cold calling, aggressive selling and the targeting of vulnerable customers.

Neil Gray: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention, and it would not be an Adjournment debate without his intervening.

The hon. Gentleman raises an important issue, which is the current status of the Funeral Planning Authority, which I will come on to discuss in greater detail in my speech. He is right that it is a voluntary body at the moment, and there has been much debate about whether the best route of regulating this market is through the Financial Conduct Authority regulation. The Government appear to be looking at FCA regulation, which I am happy enough with, although I do have some concerns about the direction of travel, which I will ask the Minister to look at. The hon. Gentleman is right. At the moment, the FPA perhaps does not have the teeth to regulate the market properly. It would acknowledge that although it has done a great deal of work in this area since my ten-minute rule Bill was introduced, if it were to have a full suite of powers to regulate the market properly, that would require it to become a statutory body.

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) is right. My hon. Friend the Member for Airdrie and Shotts (Neil Gray) brings a great number of important issues to the Chamber, and this is one on which he has spoken many times. He will be pleased to know that this week I heard from a local family-run funeral service in my constituency, who expressed support for the Treasury proposals and for enhanced consumer protection. He made the point that most funeral providers are small and micro businesses. He is concerned, given that the majority of funerals are delivered by those businesses, that such businesses could be at competitive disadvantage compared with larger providers and threatened by the cost of FCA. What are my hon. Friend’s thoughts on that?

Neil Gray: I am well aware of that family-run business, and I share its concerns. My hon. Friend speaks well for them, and it is a point that I wish to make. How do the Government protect competition in the market to make sure that smaller funeral providers and funeral plan providers are not squeezed out of the market by the burden of FCA regulation? Of all the criticisms of the route that the Government have chosen, that is the one that is expressed most keenly by people in the market.

Given the number of funeral plans that have been sold in recent years and the growth in the sector, it is critical that we get the regulation right and ensure that consumers are protected. The Citizens Advice report published a few years ago gave examples of mis-selling—people were promised particular aspects of a funeral, but when the plan was redeemed they were told that that was not part of the deal. Particular cars, coffins or flowers that were chosen for sentimental reasons, for example, were not delivered, although people thought they had paid for them. There have been widespread reports of bad sales practices such as cold calling, aggressive selling and the targeting of vulnerable customers.

Since I introduced my ten-minute rule Bill, which proposed the areas of regulation that the Government now appear to have adopted, a significant amount of change has taken place in the market. The FPA, as I have said, has taken great steps to reform its practices as a voluntary market regulator, and it suggests that 95% of the market has signed up to its regulatory model. There have been great moves across the market to reform practices, including by plan providers themselves.
Some of them are moving away from the third-party selling model that appeared to be problematic and was part of the 5% issue that concerns us all. I am pleased that my Bill proposal, which was intended to spark debate and action for change, has led to that progress. I am grateful to the Minister for taking action.

Carolyn Harris (Swansea East) (Lab): I thank the hon. Gentleman for introducing the debate on a subject that is close to my heart. I met him, the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) and other Members attending this debate to form a working party, and we intend to consider how we support the Government in looking at environmental funerals, funeral plans and the social fund. While I welcome the Government’s announcement, does the hon. Member for Airdrie and Shotts (Neil Gray) agree that we need to look at the small percentage of funeral plans that are not covered by the FPA? In that two-year window, there is an opportunity for people who can least afford to pay exorbitant fees to be exploited.

Neil Gray: I thank the hon. Lady, who is a doughty campaigner in this area, for her intervention. It should go without saying that she has done a great deal, particularly on children’s funerals, and I commend her for her work. She is absolutely right. There is a potential gap, with the two or three-year transition period the Government propose, before moving to FCA regulation. I will turn to my concerns about that in due course, but she is absolutely right to raise the issue and I look forward to continuing to work with her in this area to try to drive the changes we want.

I am pleased that my Bill proposal, which was intended to spark debate and action for change, has started that progress. I commend the Minister in particular. I am grateful that the Government are taking this issue seriously enough to consult on funeral plan regulation and are now proposing moving to a model of FCA regulation. A consultation is now under way until August on what the Government now propose to do in this area. I am grateful to the Minister and to some of his colleagues who also wish to see change and have supported my work, such as the hon. Member for Southend West (Sir David Amess), but I do have some concerns about the direction of travel that I am sure the Minister will be able to answer.

There should be some clear benefits to moving to FCA regulation, such as access to the Financial Ombudsman Service for those who have complaints about the products they have received, but it is not yet clear whether consumers who have a dispute over a funeral plan product will be able to access the financial services compensation scheme.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing the debate and, more importantly, on his Bill. Has he noticed how funeral costs and some of the practices that go on in the industry are now being highlighted in the press? Does he not agree that there should be a good look at costs in more depth? Very often, bereaved families feel ashamed to raise the question of cost, because there is the matter of pride.

Neil Gray: I absolutely agree with the hon. Gentleman, who raises an important issue. He might be aware that the Scottish Government are doing some work in this regard to set up a funerals regulator, part of which will be looking at the practices of funeral directors. I believe—I will turn to this in my speech—that that is probably what the Competition and Markets Authority investigation will be looking at, too. It is also right to acknowledge that many family-run funeral directors are linchpins of their communities. Some take on great burdens, acknowledging the hardships their customers are going through. It is right that we acknowledge that, while also accepting that there are some in the market who are not perhaps operating to the qualities that we would hope and expect to see.

On the financial services compensation scheme issue, I hope the Minister will be able to clarify in his response whether he envisages this particular model of regulation covering the financial services compensation scheme.

I am also concerned that although the Government appear very keen to move forward to a different regulatory model, as they have accepted there is a problem, they have not, in their own work, quantified the consumer detriment in the market. There was clearly a problem identified by Citizens Advice Scotland researchers in 2016, but to what extent has that problem been improved or exacerbated? The Government need to do a bit more work to update the findings of the Citizens Advice Scotland report and also the “Fairer Finance” report that followed my 10-minute rule Bill. It is clear that there are still issues in the market that need to be addressed, but I think the Minister must agree that it is for the Government now to quantify what they are so that the FCA is clear as to its remit and focus.

There also needs to be greater clarity on the likely three-year wait for changes to take effect. First of all, what happens with regulation in the interim, as there will be no incentive for those currently signed up to the voluntary scheme to carry on engaging? There certainly will not be an incentive for those outside FPA regulation—those we really wish to target in whatever model of regulation we bring forward—to come on board. What assurances can the Minister give about what the market will look like and how it will behave during the three-year wait until the FCA fully takes up responsibility for the market? Will the Minister say how many firms will be regulated under the scheme? The Treasury’s consultation document accepts that there will be consolidation in the market, as my hon. Friend the Member for Livingston (Hannah Bardell) suggested. In other words, there will be fewer companies offering these services because of the burden of FCA regulation. Has the Minister assessed whether he feels this model would continue to provide appropriate competition in the market for the consumer? Of course, the Competition and Markets Authority has been critical of some bigger funeral companies for inflated funeral costs, yet this move may give an even bigger market share to those same companies.

I do not have a crystal ball or any insider knowledge, but I fully expect the CMA to follow the Scottish Government’s lead by recommending a funeral regulator, which will look after the funeral director industry and probably some of the at-need market. That means we will be left either with a bit of a crossover in regulation or blurred lines as to who will have overall regulatory responsibility. Perhaps the Minister can clarify how he sees the regulatory environment working when both these areas are established.

In conclusion, for the last three years I have been working across this House, with the funeral plan market and with campaigning organisations to ensure that
consumers are protected from being ripped off when they are perhaps at their most vulnerable. I want to see a system of regulation that stops the outrageous practices that we have had reports of in recent years, and I want to see consumer confidence so that there is a greater uptake of funeral plans to avoid the growing problem of funeral poverty.

I am greatly heartened by the Government’s acknowledging that they share my concerns and have effectively taken on my ten-minute rule Bill. I thank the Minister and his officials for what they have done to date, but I hope he will also accept that there is a great deal of work still to do and many questions to answer. Above all else, we have to ensure that the regulatory system in place for this critical industry gets it right for consumers. That means ensuring that we have consumer protection from cold calling, greater transparency in pricing, greater transparency in the products on offer and a better link between some plan providers and the funeral directors. There needs to be greater recourse to pursue complaints and to be compensated when things go wrong.

I am not particularly bothered about who from which body has responsibility for the regulation at the end of the day. I just want to make sure that it is right and that it stops people being ripped off and funeral poverty being exacerbated. We must therefore look at where problems remain with similar issues in the over-50s plan market, which is under FCA regulation, and learn lessons for funeral plan regulation.

Thank you again, Mr Speaker, for granting this debate. I want to know from the Minister that the FCA will always see this area as a priority and that he is alive to the concerns I have expressed this evening, while accepting my thanks for pursuing this matter in the way he has.

6.36 pm

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (John Glen):

I congratulate the hon. Member for Airdrie and Shotts (Neil Gray) on securing this debate, and I thank him for all the work that he has done on this topic with his colleagues. I hope that today marks a significant moment, following the excellent work that he has undertaken. I acknowledge the ambiguities that exist at this time. Although I will try to address a number of them in my response, I invite him to meet me and officials to go through them in detail so that we can fully absorb his concerns.

I also acknowledge the work that has been undertaken by other Members who have spoken in the debate, including, in particular, that done by the hon. Member for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris), who has an ongoing interest in this topic. I mention particularly the work that she has done with the children’s funeral fund. I hope that her Adjournment debate on 1 May, with the Under-Secretary of State for Justice, my hon. Friend the Member for Charnwood (Edward Argar), was of assistance.

On Sunday, I launched a consultation that outlines the Government’s proposal to bring all funeral plan providers within the remit of the Financial Conduct Authority. I will take this opportunity to outline the rationale behind that announcement and do my best to respond to the questions that have been raised.

Sadly, many of us in the Chamber will have had to plan a funeral for a loved one. It is a difficult, emotional and expensive experience, with an average funeral costing between £4,000 and £6,000. For the last 14 years, funeral costs have been rising at twice the rate of inflation—about 6% per annum—so it is understandable that people wish to make some of the arrangements in advance, giving them the peace of mind that their loved ones will not be left with difficult decisions or a large bill after they have passed on. Funeral plans allow people to make these arrangements, to pay for their funeral in advance and to lock in a price. The market for funeral plans has grown considerably in recent years, with sales rising by nearly 200% between 2006 and 2018. Almost 1.4 million plans are now held by individuals up and down the country.

The hon. Member for Airdrie and Shotts asked about the Government’s perception of what this intervention will do to the market. That is difficult to anticipate at this point, but we will look carefully at the responses throughout the consultation, which runs up to 25 August, and will be alive to those concerns. The huge growth in the market, combined with a largely voluntary regulatory framework, has given rise to some pretty shameful practices, with some companies taking advantage of people only trying to do the right thing by their families. It is clear that the market has outgrown the 18-year-old legislative framework and that more robust regulation is needed, as the hon. Gentleman explained to the House more than two and a half years ago.

I will briefly describe the current framework. At present, funeral plan providers who offer plans backed by either a trust or an insurance contract are excluded from FCA regulation. It appears that all funeral plan providers have structured their business such that they benefit from these exclusions. A system of voluntary regulation has been established by the FPA, which has done some good work covering about 95% of the market, as the hon. Gentleman pointed out, but the reports of poor practice have largely come from providers that are not FPA members. A system that allows market participants to choose whether to be regulated cannot be sustainable for a market of this size and nature—we are talking about £3.5 billion being invested by 1.3 million people—because only the reputable firms will choose to comply.

For these reasons and following reports of poor practice, I launched a call for evidence in June last year on the regulation of the funeral plan market. The Government sought views and evidence on how the market was operating and on the Government’s initial policy proposal to bring funeral plan providers within the FCA’s remit. In the light of the evidence received, it is clear that consumer detriment is present in the market, both at the point of sale and afterwards. At the point of sale, some providers and their distributors use high-pressure and misleading sales tactics to promote and sell funeral plans. Given the context what these individuals are trying to do at a difficult time in their lives—that is particularly unacceptable. Standards of disclosure are also poor, leaving people unsure of what is included in their plan.

We have also found that after a plan has been purchased some providers remove high upfront costs in the form of commission or administration fees, which have been as high as £800, leading to concerns about whether there will be enough money left to pay for the funeral.

I want to know from the Minister that the FCA will always see this area as a priority and that he is alive to the concerns I have expressed this evening, while accepting my thanks for pursuing this matter in the way he has.
Some funeral directors have also been named on plans without their knowledge or prior consent, and in some circumstances this has led to an alternative funeral director being appointed, with customers at that vulnerable time left confused about who will conduct the funeral service. There is also anecdotal evidence of conflicts of interest within some trusts’ investment strategies, and there are clear signs that consumers are being disadvantaged.

Perhaps the most striking finding, however, was that 84% of respondents agreed that regulation must be made compulsory, so there is clear demand from the market itself for enhanced regulation. Action must and will be taken. Consumers need to understand the products they buy and be confident they are well regulated. This should have wider benefits beyond the immediate funeral plan sector. Research by the CMA, which is investigating the wider market, has found that the vast majority of people do not shop around for a funeral, which is entirely understandable following a bereavement. A properly regulated funeral plan sector that enables people to plan ahead with confidence and shop around should have knock-on effects for competition in the wider funeral sector.

The FCA is best placed to take on responsibility for regulating the sector, although I acknowledge the concern about the cost and nature of that regulation and would be happy to discuss that with the hon. Gentleman in a meeting. We need to get that right, given the wide range of small family providers, and to make sure it is appropriate. The FCA would be obliged to consult on that. It is none the less a well-established regulator, accustomed to taking strong regulatory action when necessary, and it has the appropriate rule-making powers to tackle the conduct and prudential concerns that are identified in the market. It will be able to develop a targeted and proportionate approach to regulating the market, in line with its statutory objectives.

My Department has developed a full legislative proposal to bring funeral plans within the FCA’s remit. That framework will ensure that the Government meet their three stated objectives for the regulation of the funeral plan market. First, all funeral plan providers and their distributors will be subject to robust conduct standards via FCA rules. Secondly, the FCA will have the necessary powers to tackle the prudential concerns in the market. Finally—this was raised by the hon. Gentleman—consumers will have access to the Financial Ombudsman Service if things go wrong.

Jim Shannon: The hon. Member for Airdrie and Shotts (Neil Gray) referred to compensation. I want to ask Minister about this because it was discussed at the working group today. If someone pays for a funeral plan and the firm that takes the money goes bust or ceases to operate, will there be a method whereby people can get their money back?

John Glen: That would be resolved by the process in which we are currently engaged—the consultation process, and the proposals for legislation in the autumn—and my expectation is that that is what we shall be aiming for.

We should set the framework for a market that functions more fairly and in the interests of consumers. The future regulatory framework for funeral plans was set out, in detail, in a consultation that I launched on Sunday. The consultation will run for 12 weeks, and it will give stakeholders an opportunity to comment on the proposed legislative framework before the Government consider the responses and finalise their proposed approach.

The hon. Member for Airdrie and Shotts asked an important question about what would happen during the gap between now and the introduction of the full new regulations. Whatever regulatory route is chosen, a transition will be necessary. FCA regulation can be carried out via secondary legislation and will therefore be quickest. The membership of the existing regulatory authority—the self-defining one—clearly has some reputational benefits in the interim, and I would encourage consumers to use the FPA-regulated providers during that period. I recognise that there is a dispute about the most appropriate way forward. That is what the consultation will be about, and the Government will reflect carefully before presenting proposals.

I hope that I have responded adequately to the points that have been raised. I thank colleagues on both sides of the House for their contributions to the debate. This is a very important issue involving real human misery, and as the hon. Gentleman has said, what was happening was an outrage. I am determined that we will get this right for our constituents across the country and leave the market in a far better state.

Question put and agreed to.

6.48 pm

House adjourned.
Mr Speaker: I call Vicky Ford—not here.

Deidre Brock: While the Department for International Development has a clear strategy for promoting low-carbon development in low-income countries, fossil fuels made up a shocking 99.4% of UK Export Finance’s energy support to low and middle-income countries in the last financial year. Does the Secretary of State agree with the International Development Committee’s finding that his Department’s spending is “damaging the coherence of the Government’s approach to combating climate change”, and what steps has he taken to ensure a more joined-up approach among his Cabinet colleagues?

George Hollingbery: The UK has an enviable record of success in decarbonisation. A target will be agreed of an 80% reduction by 2050; renewable capacity is up four times since 2010; and there will be £10 billion in annual support by 2021. Expertise is being built in offshore, smart energy, sustainable construction, precision agriculture, green finance, electric vehicles and so on. As I travel around the world, I meet many representatives from developing countries who are interested in all these technologies. Our trade policy is focused absolutely on promoting international trade. We are out there making sure that the deals we do internationally suit those countries with which we do them. We are bringing in the unilateral preferences that are transitioning across from a European perspective. We are confident that the backing we can give developing countries is suitable for their circumstances, and allows them to participate in world trade and so bring their people out of poverty.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): I think we are spending £1.5 billion in the current period on climate change for less-developed nations, and the same amount—£1.5 billion—on promoting economic development and trade, so there is some synergy for us to work with, is there not?

George Hollingbery: There absolutely is. As we grow our capacity in this country, we have more capability of exporting and, indeed, advising others on climate change. Yes, we can work in countries on poverty reduction at the same time as promoting energy sustainability.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): Will the Minister say a bit more in relation to climate change and trade policy, particularly vis-à-vis the US, because the President of the United States has said:

“The concept of global warming was created by and for the Chinese in order to make U.S. manufacturing non-competitive”?

George Hollingbery: The recent chapters in CETA—the EU-Canada comprehensive economic and trade agreement—and the EU agreements with Japan, Singapore and Vietnam include quite clear climate change commitments. We are of course signatories to the Paris agreement. I recognise that the President of the United States has said it is going to withdraw from that; it has currently not done so. Where it is possible to have chapters in our free trade agreements on climate change and on our climate change policies, we will do so; where not, we have to understand that we can open doors to dialogue through those trade deals. Indeed, we can then create flows of exports on untariffed sales at more favourable rates into those economies and help the transition, even in more developed countries where it is difficult to negotiate such chapters in our FTAs.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): May I congratulate the Government on their policies and on what they are doing on the way forward? We should set an example to the rest of the world when it comes to global policies on how we trade. The recent election results have proven that there is a wish among all parties for that to happen, so we need to set an example. What has been done with
the regional Administrations to ensure that Scotland, Northern Ireland, Wales and England work together to set that example?

George Hollingbery: As the hon. Gentleman knows well, the UK has extensive funding for climate change mitigation and for sustainability. I would simply say to him that, as and when we manage to reinstitute the Stormont Assembly in Northern Ireland, we can have discussions between the DIT and other parts of the UK Government to ensure that those issues are taken forward.

Bill Esterson (Sefton Central) (Lab): The Secretary of State’s damascene conversion to addressing the climate emergency is welcome, but, as we have heard, some of those with whom he wishes to conclude trade agreements are less enlightened. Given what he has just said, will the Minister commit to introducing climate clauses to all future trade agreements? Will he publish specific details of the support his Department offers the fossil fuel sector through export finance, and say how that support conforms with the Equator Principles?

George Hollingbery: As I have said, we will consider each and every FTA on its own merits, and in certain circumstances we may find partners who are not prepared to put those sorts of clauses in an FTA. On balance, however, we will look at the advantage to exporters of low-carbon products, and ensure that as and when we proceed with those agreements—if we decide to do so—we facilitate the export of low-carbon products so that economies represented by Governments who do not wish to include an FTA clause on the environment can benefit from the transition that lower input costs produce. I have already made clear the Government’s position on publishing the output of UKEF. There will be an element of carbon-based energy generation in UKEF’s mix in the short term. The UK has huge and growing expertise that will no doubt come to the forefront of UKEF financing in due course, as that transition happens.

UK-Israel Medical Research and Development

4. Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con): What steps he is taking to strengthen UK trading relations with Israel in medical research and development; and if he will make a statement. [911190]

The Secretary of State for International Trade and President of the Board of Trade (Dr Liam Fox): Before I answer that question, on the 75th anniversary of D-day it is worth our reflecting that we in this House are able to ask and answer questions in a free and democratic Parliament because of the sacrifices made by those who went before us.

Our dedicated team at the UK embassy in Tel Aviv actively promotes UK-Israel trade, and there is extensive collaboration on medical research between the UK and Israel. The UK-Israel Tech Hub, which is based at the embassy, helps to create tech and innovation partnerships across several sectors, including healthcare.

Michael Fabricant: That is very good to hear. My right hon. Friend knows the state of Israeli technology—for example, all our chips, including the Intel fifth, sixth and seventh core chips, are developed in Israel for Intel in America. Magen David Adom, the equivalent of the Israeli Red Cross, has an app that provides live streaming, medical history and the location of people who use it, and that sort of innovation could be of great benefit to the UK. When we leave the European Union, what will be the advantages of doing business with Israel for both our nations?

Dr Fox: There are huge advantages to our collaboration in or outside the European Union. To enable us to shine a light on the excellence that my hon. Friend mentions, on my recent trip to Israel I agreed with Prime Minister Netanyahu that we will jointly sponsor a Government high-level trade and investment conference that will enable us to show the world the best of what both countries have to offer in the sector mentioned by my hon. Friend. Friend.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): I congratulate the Secretary of State on mentioning D-day. My father served in the Royal Engineers throughout the war, and my thoughts are of him and our brave troops today.

The Secretary of State is right to say that global trade can take place only in conditions of peace. Will he back the small group of MPs from across the House who are trying to create close relationships between university research in the UK and university research in Israel?

Dr Fox: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his kind words. He is right—where we are able to take advantage of the innovation coming out of universities, we should make every attempt to do so. One reason that international investors give for putting money into the United Kingdom is the access to high-quality innovation that comes from the collaboration between industry and academia. Where we can take full advantage of that, including with bilateral relations elsewhere, we should do so.

John Howell (Henley) (Con): The Secretary of State has already mentioned the UK-Israel Tech Hub, which is the first of its kind and has already generated business of £85 million. How does he see that developing over the coming years?

Dr Fox: I see it going from strength to strength, and as greater investment goes into both economies we will be able to scale up the innovation and creativity that is clearly shown in the tech sector. That will be of benefit not only to our two countries, but to the wider global economy.

Judith Cummins (Bradford South) (Lab): I wish to associate myself fully with the Secretary of State’s remarks and pay tribute to the sacrifices of the fallen.

What assessment has the Secretary of State made of Israel’s participation in the agreement on pan-Euro-Mediterranean cumulation on the trade in medical products between the UK and the EU? What progress have the Government made in replicating other agreements between the EU and Israel, including the 2013 EU-Israel agreement on conformity assessment and acceptance of industrial products?

Dr Fox: As the hon. Lady is aware, we reached a continuity agreement with Israel on 19 February, which will come into effect as we leave the European Union.
The conformity assessment element of that is very important because of the number of generic prescriptions that the NHS takes advantage of that are produced by Israeli pharmaceutical companies. We will want to see as much continuity in all those arrangements as possible.

Global Free Trade

5. Mr Mark Prisk (Hertford and Stortford) (Con): What recent assessment his Department has made of the value of global free trade to developing countries. [R]

The Secretary of State for International Trade and President of the Board of Trade (Dr Liam Fox): Free trade is a driver of economic growth that can trigger positive changes in a country’s economy, helping to raise incomes, create jobs and lift people out of poverty. The poorest countries have enjoyed some of the benefits of global free trade through receiving preferential access to the UK, the world’s fifth-biggest market.

Mr Prisk: I thank the Secretary of State for his answer. However, the risk of protectionism is growing and that threatens both free trade and the millions of jobs in developing countries that come with it. May I therefore urge the Secretary of State and his colleagues actively to oppose protectionism, particularly at the WTO and indeed when expressed in this Chamber, so that we can ensure that more of the world’s poorer citizens benefit by trading themselves out of poverty?

Dr Fox: Those countries that have benefited from free and open trade, and enjoy the prosperity that we do today, have not only a duty economically to ensure the best outcomes but a moral duty to ensure that those in developing countries are able to benefit from the same trading systems that we have. Simply to say that we are more advanced and are pulling up the ladder behind us would be a betrayal of all those who have believed in free trade and practised it in recent years.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): Does the Secretary of State agree that if it is going to end poverty, free trade also has to be fair trade? What steps are the Government taking to ensure that trade deals, whether through the WTO, the European Union or bilaterally, are checked against the sustainable development goals to make sure that they are poverty and development-proofed?

Dr Fox: The Government take those elements extremely seriously, which is why we actually seek a closer alignment between our trade and development policies. For example, we are able to invest in countries to give them greater capability to add value to their primary produce, while at the same time potentially being able to take advantage of tariff reduction to increase market access. By bringing the two together, that can be synergistic for this country and for developing countries.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con) rose—

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con) rose—

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con) rose—

Mr Speaker: A notable Northamptonshire contest. I call Mr Peter Bone.

Mr Bone: Thank you, Mr Speaker. Does the Secretary of State agree that the European Union is an inward-looking protectionist trading bloc that acts to the detriment of developing countries?

Dr Fox: I certainly believe that the European Union’s common external tariff provides barriers to trade for many developing countries, so they are unable to take advantage of adding value to their primary produce. One of the advantages of leaving the European Union will be that Britain will have the ability to reduce tariffs to enable greater access for some of the poorest countries.

Mr Bone: So that’s a yes?

Mr Speaker: We’ll take it as a yes.

G20 Trade Ministers Meeting

7. Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): What his priorities are for the upcoming G20 Trade Ministers meeting in Japan.

The Secretary of State for International Trade and President of the Board of Trade (Dr Liam Fox): At the upcoming G20 trade and digital economy ministerial meeting I will voice the UK’s continued support for the multilateral trading system. I will work with other G20 members to reduce trade tensions, support WTO reform, and advocate new rules on e-commerce and services trade liberalisation.

Sir Edward Leigh: Relations with Japan matter enormously. Our termination of the Anglo-Japanese treaty 1923 was probably one of the worst geo-strategic mistakes we ever made, propelling that country into autarchy and nationalism. Will the Secretary of State confirm that post Brexit his priority will be to ensure a global free trade world, with us and Japan leading the way?

Dr Fox: It is absolutely essential, particularly given the rise of protectionism globally, that we commit ourselves to a rules-based system based on the WTO. Of course, we have abilities to augment that by other regional relationships, which is why we have had the public consultation and the debate in Parliament about the potential accession to the CPTPP—the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership. The Japanese Government have been key in encouraging the United Kingdom to seek such a membership.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con) rose—

Mr Speaker: Oh, very well.

Mr Hollobone: Seventy per cent. of the world’s poorest people live not in the poorest countries but in the middle-income countries, and the G20 has a vital role to encourage these people to work their way out of poverty by free trade. Does the Secretary of State agree?
Dr Fox: I do agree, but if the G20 countries are intent on doing so, they need to reverse the recent trend of increasing non-tariff barriers to trade. The largest number of new barriers to trade introduced since the financial crisis have been in G20 countries, so they do not simply have to do the preaching; they have to do the practising, too.

**International Education Strategy**

8. Mr William Wragg (Hazel Grove) (Con): What progress the Government has made on the implementation of its international education strategy.

Graham Stuart: We have a supplier relationship management programme, where we have built relationships at ministerial and senior official level with the largest investors into the UK. It is notable that in 2017-18, the 2,072 FDI projects that landed in the UK created 75,968 new jobs. Investors are not put off by Brexit, but they are deterred by the threat of nationalisation by the Labour party. It is the fear that job creators most often express to me, which goes to show that Labour does not even need to be in power to damage British jobs and living standards. The threat of Labour is enough.

Geraint Davies (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op): My father, David Thomas Morgan Davies, was head of economic development at the Welsh Office and got Ford to move to Bridgend in the ‘70s, yet this week we find that it is announcing its closure at a time when Donald Trump is saying that we are going to have a great trade deal. Does the Minister agree that the people working in Ford who voted in good faith to leave the EU did not vote to leave their jobs and deserve a say on the final deal, so that they can think again and stay in the EU instead of losing their jobs and being decimated by the Americans?

**Export Strategy**

10. Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): What progress the Government have made on implementing their export strategy.

Graham Stuart: The hon. Gentleman again wants to frustrate the will of his constituents. The automotive industry is in massive global flux, and trying to link every decision to Brexit leads people astray, just as he and so many of his colleagues do as they come up with these false arguments for a second referendum. The people want the thing they decided to be done and they do not want to hear weasel words from the Labour party, trying to say the opposite.
Graham Stuart: One of this Administration’s successes is the establishment of the Department for International Trade. For the first time, we have a dedicated, focused international economic Department that seeks to build our global prosperity. Africa, which is expected to double its GDP between 2015 and 2030 and whose population will nearly double in the not too distant future, is an area in which we need to up our engagement. That is why we are organising an African uplift this year, and we will continue to do more.

Stewart Hosie (Dundee East) (SNP): Implementing the export strategy also requires us to implement the cyber-security export strategy, which relies heavily on UK Export Finance for direct lending, export refinancing and so on. If cyber-security exports are a genuine strategic priority, what proportion of UK export financing will be committed to its support?

Graham Stuart: UK Export Finance responds to the market. It is there to ensure that no viable British export fails for lack of finance. 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Damien Moore (Southport) (Con): What steps are being taken to champion the rules-based system in emerging economies such as Tunisia?

Dr Fox: The whole issue of the WTO will be at the centre of what we discuss at the G20. The alternative to a rules-based system is a deals-based system, which would suit only the very biggest and most powerful economies, and we would lose the potential to use trade as a means of getting countries out of poverty. The rules-based system is necessary because it applies to everyone—the richest and the poorest, the strongest and the weakest—and we must give every defence to it that we can.

T5. [911206] John Grogan (Keighley) (Lab): Will Ministers say a word of praise for the work of the Yorkshire and Humber international trade team based in Barnsley? Would it not be even more effective if it was accountable not to Whitehall but to a directly elected Yorkshire mayor?

Graham Stuart: I am grateful to my hon. Friend from Yorkshire who is right to highlight the outstanding contribution from the team in Barnsley. I will leave it to other Departments and Ministers to reply on whether or not a Yorkshire mayor would be the right thing to have, but what I can say is that we will continue to work together cross-party to promote business and employment across the Humber and Yorkshire region.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): For the benefit of my constituents in Corby and east Northamptonshire will the Secretary of State take the opportunity to knock on the head this nonsense that the NHS will be up for sale in any future free trade agreement?

Dr Fox: I am tempted to say “I refer my hon. Friend to the answer I gave some moments ago.” Let me be very clear for the benefit exclusively of his constituents in Corby and east Northamptonshire will the Secretary of State take the opportunity to knock on the head this nonsense that the NHS will be up for sale in any future free trade agreement?

T6. [911207] Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): I heard the Secretary of State’s passion as a medic. Will he clarify that he can commit now to excluding the NHS from any future trade deals if the UK leaves the EU, and that no foreign power, no matter how small, on our NHS, no matter who wins the Conservative party’s leadership race?

Dr Fox: I refer the hon. Lady to the answer I gave some moments ago.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): Trade with Iceland is of particular importance to my constituency and the ports of Immingham and neighbouring Grimsby. What progress is being made to develop our trading links and investment with Iceland?

Dr Fox: I visited Iceland just a couple of weeks ago and had constructive discussions with my counterpart there and with a range of businesses. We have already signed the continuity agreement, which I know will be of enormous benefit to my hon. Friend’s constituency and provide a great deal of comfort to those involved in those industries.

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): In Blaenau Gwent, we have been working with Fujitsu to encourage our young people to go into cyber-security, but I have learned that there is a real shortage of cyber-security specialists here in the UK. What support can the Government give to training in this key sector so that we can boost our exports for the future?

Dr Fox: The hon. Gentleman makes an important point. The value of UK cyber-security exports is set to rise from about £1.8 billion at the moment to £3.2 billion by 2022, and 800 companies are currently involved in the sector. He is right to say that one of the elements we will need to provide is the appropriate education, coming from the sector, to give people the appropriate skills as well as in-house training. The Government, through their wider agenda—the skills agenda, the apprenticeship scheme and what we are doing in the Department—are well aware of the point that he has raised. Without the skills, we will be unable to take advantage of the tech and knowledge that we have.

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

The Secretary of State was asked—

Climate Emergency

1. Jo Swinson (East Dunbartonshire) (LD): What assessment he has made of the effect of the climate emergency on his Department’s priorities. [911154]

The Secretary of State for International Development (Rory Stewart): There should be no distinction at all between work that we do—

Mr Speaker: Order. I believe the Secretary of State is going to group this question with question 3.

Rory Stewart: Indeed, Mr Speaker. Thank you very much.

3. Emma Dent Coad (Kensington) (Lab): What steps he is taking to prioritise tackling climate change. [911156]

Rory Stewart: There should be no distinction at all between the work that we do on international development and the work that we do on climate and the emergency. We face a climate cataclysm, and if we get this wrong, 100 million more people will be in poverty. I would therefore like, as Secretary of State for International Development, to double the amount that our Department spends within our budget on climate and the environment, and to double the effort that the Department puts into that issue.

Jo Swinson: I welcome the Minister to the Dispatch Box in his new Cabinet role, and I warmly welcome his clear and genuine commitment to tackling the climate emergency. Does he accept, however, that there is a contradiction between the excellent work that his Department does in helping to mitigate and adapt to the climate emergency in developing countries and the way in which, through UK Export Finance, we continue
to subsidise fossil fuels to the tune of billions of pounds? Will he use his leadership in Government, in whatever form, to ensure that he pushes to stop those fossil fuel subsidies?

Rory Stewart: This is of course a very serious challenge. That is fundamentally an issue for the Department for International Trade, but the hon. Lady is absolutely right to say that it is extremely important, when we think about an environment and climate strategy for the Government, to be fully joined up, particularly in relation not only to what the DIT does but to what we do through the Commonwealth and through CDC’s investments to ensure that they tie in with our climate and environment priorities.

Emma Dent Coad: The $100 billion climate finance commitment made by developed countries including the UK is separate from the international aid commitment, as climate finance is an additional challenge to development, yet the UK’s climate finance currently comes entirely from the aid budget, displacing spending on health, education and life-saving measures. The Minister has just explained that this will come from existing funds, so how are the Government exploring alternative sources of climate finance to take the pressure off the aid budget?

Rory Stewart: There is a range of climate finance initiatives that we could pursue, including green bonds here in the United Kingdom, but fundamentally, all the investments we make in health, education and economic development need to be proofed for the environment and climate. The distinction between these two things is often deeply misleading because, as the World Bank has just pointed out, if we do not get the climate and environment right, we will have 100 million more people living in poverty.

Chris Law (Dundee West) (SNP): The United Nations framework for combating climate change has three pillars: mitigation; adaptation; and loss and damage. Does the Secretary of State agree with the United Nations framework convention on climate change that loss and damage to property is a huge consequence of climate change? If so, why do the UK Government allocate official development assistance spending only to mitigation and adaptation?

Rory Stewart: These are difficult choices that we have to make. We are currently leading in the United Nations on the resilience pillar. It is very important, and I think everybody in this House—indeed, in the country—would want to ensure that the next COP summit is hosted in London next year, so that we can take on the baton from Paris, but in order to do that we need to show a distinctive contribution. It is in resilience that we shall be leading the UN discussions, both in Abu Dhabi and then in the UN in September. I think that is where the UK should position itself.

Foreign National Offenders

2. Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): If he will allocate funding from the international aid budget to build prisons in recipient countries to facilitate the return of foreign national offenders to prisons in their home countries.

Dr Andrew Murrison: The UK aid budget is already building the capacity of security and justice institutions in developing countries. That includes support for improved prison conditions, which can facilitate the return of foreign national offenders. Since 2010, we have removed more than 48,000 FNOs from the UK, with over 5,000 removed in 2018-19.

Mr Hollobone: We spend almost £1 billion a year on incarcerating more than 9,000 foreign national offenders in our prisons, many from developing countries to which we already give international assistance. Given that it is far cheaper to build a prison to requisite standards in those countries than here, does it not make sense to use our international aid budget to send these people home, using the funds from the Department for International Development?

Mr Speaker: I am advised that the Minister of State has just been elevated to the Privy Council. I congratulate him on that and wish him well, and I am sure the House will want to join me in congratulating the right hon. Gentleman.

Dr Murrison: Thank you, Mr Speaker. My hon. Friend the Member for Kettering (Mr Hollobone) knows very well that official development assistance is disbursable only in accordance with the rules set out by the OECD. There is a good argument for building prisons, in order to remove prisoners from the UK. However, ODA funds could not be used for such a purpose, since the primary intention of ODA funds is to render assistance. I would suggest very strongly that my hon. Friend speaks to his right hon. and hon. colleagues in the Home Office and the Department of Justice.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): That is quite a helpful answer. Supporting the justice systems in developing countries is hugely important, but we should not make any move towards the notion of tied aid or a quid pro quo, such as was suggested in the substantive question; that would be worrying. Will the Minister make it clear that that is not a policy of the Department for International Development?

Dr Murrison: It is not a question of that not being a DFID policy; such a thing would be proscribed by the OECD and its development advisory committee. The proposal by my hon. Friend the Member for Kettering has merit, but it would not be proper for international development funds to be used for such a thing, and if we did so, it would not count towards the 0.7% to which we are committed.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): When I was in the Minister’s position, I refused Foreign Office requests—indeed, instructions—to build a prison on Pitcairn to accommodate one prisoner. Will he assure me that he will not cave in?

Dr Murrison: I think I can reassure my right hon. Friend that I will in no way be caving in.

Women’s Equality

4. Eddie Hughes (Walsall North) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to help increase women’s equality throughout the world.
The Minister of State, Department for International Development (Harriett Baldwin): Our strategic vision for gender equality focuses on ending violence against women and girls, on girls’ education, on promoting sexual and reproductive health and rights, and on women’s empowerment.

Eddie Hughes: It is vital that girls in developing countries have access to high-quality education, so what progress is the Department making to help ensure that happens?

Harriett Baldwin: I am so pleased that my hon. Friend can support the “12 years of quality education” campaign that we are leading around the world, together with France and Canada. It is an incredibly important part of development, because evidence suggests that for every year that a girl spends in school, her lifetime earnings increase by 10%. Hon. Members can see how powerful that is in terms of prosperity for our world.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): The Women Deliver conference heard this week from Sawas Al Reiﬁ, a Yemeni development researcher and activist, who said:

“It is important for Yemeni women to be at the table, but we need to make sure Yemeni women’s issues are at the table too.”

What is the Minister doing to achieve that?

Harriett Baldwin: I am pleased to say that my ministerial colleague Baroness Sugg has been at that conference in Vancouver this week. The hon. Lady highlights a very important issue, because the evidence and the research that we have done suggests that involving women in peace processes very signiﬁcantly increases the chances of their being successful and sustainable.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersﬁeld) (Lab/Co-op): Does the Minister agree that if we want to make women more equal worldwide, we have to free them from poverty? And does she agree that a road death or serious injury can plunge a family into long-term poverty? Does she agree that we must act now to stop this greatest epidemic of our times, which kills more women and children worldwide?

Harriett Baldwin: May I pay tribute to the hon. Gentleman’s tireless work on road safety around the world? He and I have met to discuss this issue, which is one of the biggest killers around the world. Of course, it is a killer of women and girls as well, and often of girls on their way to school. We are thinking about how we can best make sure that, where there is a need to develop growth—where the World Bank is providing finance, for example—the road safety elements are taken into account from the beginning.

Preet Kaur Gill (Birmingham, Edgbaston) (Lab/Co-op): In its latest annual review, the CDC claims that, of the jobs it supports, only 32% are for women and 68% are for men. Does the Minister agree it is not acceptable that over twice as many men are being supported with jobs via these investments. Given her Department’s commitment to gender equality, will she take this up directly with the CDC?

Harriett Baldwin: We should rightly recognise the important work that the CDC does in creating these jobs in the first place. This is a vital way in which the UK can be one of the signiﬁcant investors in some of the poorest and most difﬁcult to reach economies in the world. The equality that we are almost beginning to enjoy here in our workplace has not yet reached many of these developing countries. The hon. Lady raises a sensible and valid point that I will be happy to take up.

Trade Promotion

5. Sir David Amess (Southend West) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to promote trade for development.

The Secretary of State for International Development (Rory Stewart): As China and other developing countries have proved so much over the last decades, the real key to unlocking people’s potential and eliminating poverty is, of course, through economic development, and trade is central to that. The great beneﬁt of trade, and of free trade in particular, is that it unlocks the potential not just for consumers and businesses in developing countries but for countries such as our own, too. That is why our programmes in Ethiopia, Bangladesh and, more recently, Jordan are heavily focused on trade.

Sir David Amess: Is my right hon. Friend aware that a number of local companies in Southend are very keen to be involved in trade and development, including Borough plating and Jota Aviation? Does he see any further business opportunities once we have left the European Union?

Rory Stewart: First, I pay tribute to those businesses in my hon. Friend’s constituency. It is incredibly important that, through every bit of Government policy, we support small and medium-sized enterprises in Britain. There is huge potential around the world. I would just warn, however, when people start talking about a no-deal Brexit, that we need to be very careful in specifying what kind of tariff levels people are talking about and with whom they are negotiating. Because certainly farmers in my constituency, the automotive sector and the aviation sector will suffer terribly if we end up with the wrong arrangements.

Geraint Davies (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op): On that point, we know that Donald Trump favours a no-deal Brexit so that we turn our back on the EU market and sit at his feet—the American economy is seven times the size of ours. We know that Donald Trump does not agree with climate change, but will the Secretary of State ensure that we focus on investing in renewable technologies via overseas development, rather than continuing to subsidise fossil fuels through export credit guarantees, so that we can build a sustainable world together?

Rory Stewart: This is a very big challenge. There is huge potential for the British economy and, of course, for the world and the climate emergency in getting involved in new technologies. To take one example, I would very much like to put considerably more money from DFID into research and development in renewable technologies at British universities. If we can develop...
the next generation of solar film—light spectrum technology—it can convince China not to build the next generation of coal-fired stations. That will make a huge difference to the climate and the world, but also to British research.

**Tom Pursglove** (Corby) (Con): Will the Secretary of State set out for the House why the customs union is the wrong policy choice when it comes to lifting people out of poverty in the developing world through free trade?

**Rory Stewart**: I strongly disagree; I think it is incredibly important that we have zero-tariff, zero-quota access to European markets, to defend the future of the British economy. We are talking about the climate, which is central to this Department. If Europe needs 300 million electric cars over the next few decades, I would like them to be manufactured in the United Kingdom. We have huge potential in battery technology; we can make the planet a better place; and we can create great jobs for British businesses, and the way to do that is to have the access to those markets.

**Lesotho: Civil Society**

6. **Ian C. Lucas** (Wrexham) (Lab): What steps his Department is taking to support civil society in Lesotho.

**The Minister of State, Department for International Development** (Harriett Baldwin): There are strong links between the UK and civil society in Lesotho. Our support for civil society includes the volunteering for development programme, through which we are working in Lesotho to support young people’s rights, and access to sexual and reproductive health services.

**Ian C. Lucas**: First, may I thank the Minister for the recent meeting we had on the subject of Lesotho and thank the Government for restoring the high commissioner in Lesotho? Will she work with the high commissioner to build links with civil society in Lesotho, because of the difficulties that exist in terms of the Lesotho Government and corruption? Massive links between Wales and Lesotho have been built up over many years, and we want to help the good people of Lesotho to improve their lives and not be impeded by payments to Ministers in Lesotho, which are causing massive problems.

**Harriett Baldwin**: I am pleased to tell the House that the progress is on track. Although we are not quite ready to announce the name of the high commissioner in Eswatini, I believe someone has been identified for the post. So good progress is being made, and I am encouraging our Foreign Secretary to go to southern Africa to open these two new high commissions later this year.

**Antimicrobial Resistance**

7. **Kevin Hollinrake** (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to tackle antimicrobial resistance throughout the world.

**The Minister of State, Department for International Development** (Dr Andrew Murrison): Antimicrobial resistance is a major global health threat and tackling it is a UK priority. DFID works alongside the Department of Health and Social Care and other Departments to support research on and development of new antimicrobials and diagnostic tools and to reduce the need for antimicrobials by preventing infection and enabling prompt diagnosis and treatment.

**Kevin Hollinrake**: The O’Neill review makes the case that high-income countries should help low-income countries do important mitigation works in this area, with one example being reducing pollution from pharmaceutical production facilities that give rise to superbugs, which can travel round the world, including to the UK. Will my right hon. Friend outline the work we are carrying out in this area?

**Dr Murrison**: Yes, but before doing so, I wish to pay tribute to my hon. Friend’s work and interest in this area. He may be familiar with this, but I would like to draw his attention to its antimicrobial resistance benchmark of 30 pharmaceutical companies, which prompts the pharmaceutical industry to do much more to bring AMR under control, including by reducing pharmaceutical pollution from the undertakings it operates.

**Kerry McCarthy** (Bristol East) (Lab): In some countries, 80% of the total consumption of antibiotics is in the animals sector. What are we doing to support the World Health Organisation’s recommendations on stopping really important antibiotics being used for growth promotion and disease prevention in animals, rather than for their proper use, which is to treat disease?

**Dr Murrison**: The hon. Lady is absolutely right on that. The use of antimicrobials for food animals in this country is falling, and of course the use of antimicrobials for veterinary purposes features in the Government’s strategy “Tackling antimicrobial resistance”, which was published in January. She will also be aware that it is important to address this particular aspect of AMR, not least to address our commitments under sustainable development goal 3, which is to do with health and wellbeing.
Mr Philip Dunne (Ludlow) (Con): What steps he is taking to enable small charities in the UK to access funding from his Department.

Mr Speaker: Order. We are running late. I will accommodate the remaining questioners on the condition that they confine themselves to a single-sentence question, without preamble. No dilation is required.

Small Charities: Funding

The Secretary of State for International Development (Rory Stewart): In the end, the Department for International Development is of course spending taxpayers’ money. To work out how to spend it in a way that resonates with the British people, we must get much better at focusing on the small charities that British citizens back. The way to do that is to learn, from examples such as the lottery fund, how to provide more support for small charities. We will push ahead with that work to make sure that small charities flourish.

Mr Speaker: The Secretary of State is an extraordinarily brilliant and cerebral fellow. He has not quite yet got the hang of the rather more prosaic matter of the announcement of the desire to group, but I shall do it for him. The Secretary of State wishes to group this question with Question 12. I know that these are comparatively footling matters, but in procedural terms, they are not footling. Footling is a very good word, I think.

Mr Dunne: Would it form part of a preamble, Mr Speaker?

Mr Speaker: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for the support he already gives through his Department, but many Members will have charities in their constituencies, such as the Hotcourses Foundation. What more can my right hon. Friend do to support British charities that do excellent work in Africa?

Rory Stewart: Two quick points: first, we must understand that Signal in Shropshire, which does work on hearing loss, is a really important symbol of the kind of work that small charities can do, and it is an inspiration to all of us in this country to invest more in technology to deal with hearing loss. We are terribly bad with our technology investments on this issue; we could transform it. Secondly, I return to the idea that we need officials from DFID to work much more closely with these charities to make it easier for them to get our support.

12. Chris Green (Bolton West) (Con): What steps he is taking to ensure that aid spent through the prosperity fund is focused on poverty reduction.

Mr Speaker: The Secretary of State is an extraordinarily brilliant and cerebral fellow. He has not quite yet got the hang of the rather more prosaic matter of the announcement of the desire to group, but I shall do it for him. The Secretary of State wishes to group this question with Question 12. I know that these are comparatively footling matters, but in procedural terms, they are not footling. Footling is a very good word, I think.

Mr Speaker: Order. We are running late. I will accommodate the remaining questioners on the condition that they confine themselves to a single-sentence question, without preamble. No dilation is required.

Small Charities: Funding

The Minister of State, Department for International Development (Harriett Baldwin): The primary purpose of the prosperity fund is reducing poverty through
inclusive economic growth. Departments that execute prosperity fund programmes are responsible for ensuring that they meet the requirements of the International Development (Official Development Assistance Target) Act 2015.

**Bill Esterson:** Between 2016 and 2018, the prosperity fund financed 16 fossil fuel projects across the world, including two in fracking. Is not this obsession with fossil fuels, despite the fine words of the Secretary of State, just confirmation that this Government could not care less about addressing the climate emergency, which is, after all, one of the biggest threats to alleviating world poverty?

**Harriett Baldwin:** These funds are obviously administered by other Government Departments in compliance with the wording of the Act, so I am not seized of the specifics of what the hon. Gentleman refers to. He will know that we do need to work together as a world to reduce emissions. One of the ways in which we are doing that is to encourage people to power past coal. Often we can do that by substituting less polluting fossil fuels. It may be in that context that these disbursements were made.

**Global Fund: AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria**

11. **Bambos Charalambous** (Enfield, Southgate) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the extent to which the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria is improving access to healthcare for the most vulnerable and marginalised communities. [911167]

**The Minister of State, Department for International Development** (Dr Andrew Murrison): The Global Fund directs its resources to countries with the highest disease burden and the least ability to pay and within countries to key vulnerable and marginalised populations. The UK was the second largest donor to the fund’s fifth replenishment, which is currently tackling the three big killers that the hon. Gentleman cites in his question.

**Bambos Charalambous:** Will the Minister tell me what assessment he has made of the work of the Global Fund in co-ordination with Gavi, the Vaccine Alliance, and how his Department is working to foster this collaboration so that the most vulnerable communities receive all the healthcare that they need?

**Dr Murrison:** Given the nature of the conditions that the Global Fund principally deals with, the hon. Gentleman is right to raise Gavi. The UK is the biggest contributor to Gavi for a very good reason—vaccination works. In dealing with those three key killers, it is clearly vital that we focus on prevention. That means not just vaccination, and Gavi does not simply vaccinate people, but dealing with a range of public health issues that are necessary in order to prevent infection happening from the beginning. This Government fully support both Gavi and the Global Fund.

**Topical Questions**

T1. **Stephen Doughty** (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

**The Secretary of State for International Development** (Rory Stewart): There is one big issue at the centre of everything that we do in development, which is climate and the environment. This is a global problem—it is not just a domestic problem—and it needs a global response, which is why the Department for International Development is central to that response. That is why I would like to double the amount that this Department spends on climate and the environment, and why I would make sure that every policy in our Department is properly assessed for its impact on climate and the environment, and it is on that that we will be judged over the next generation as a Department and as a nation.

**Stephen Doughty:** I welcome the Secretary of State to his role and wholeheartedly agree with what he just said on climate change. Indeed, climate change has affected Somalia. As he will know, I am secretary to the all-party Parliamentary group on Somalia and we recently welcomed the Finance Minister. Can he say what steps his Department is taking to support the upcoming parliamentary elections in Somalia and also the talks between Somaliland and Somalia? Will he meet the all-party parliamentary group to discuss what we can do to support that fantastic country?

**Rory Stewart:** First, I pay huge tribute to the work of the APPG on Somaliland. As all Members of the House will know, Somaliland is a remarkable success story. Somalia itself has been through a very difficult situation, and Somaliland is a small miracle in a sea of difficulty. We worked very closely with Somaliland on the last presidential elections and we will be supporting the new parliamentary elections. On my last visit to Somaliland, I was lucky enough to meet the gentleman who is now President. There is much more we can do and I would be delighted to sit down with the hon. Gentleman to discuss all those issues.

T5. **Mr William Wragg** (Hazel Grove) (Con): Helping Uganda Schools—known as HUGS—is a small international development charity based in my constituency. Would the Minister meet me and representatives of this wonderful educational and health charity to discuss how DFID can improve access to funding programmes for small charities?

**The Minister of State, Department for International Development** (Harriett Baldwin): It sounds like a wonderful opportunity to meet representatives of HUGS in my hon. Friend’s constituency. As the Secretary of State said, we do have a small charities challenge fund, and we need to make it easier for small charities such as HUGS to be able to access some of that funding. I would be more than happy to meet my hon. Friend’s constituents.

**Dan Carden** (Liverpool, Walton) (Lab): May I start by saying how much I am enjoying following the Secretary of State’s novel approach to his party’s leadership contest? He certainly stands out in a field of populists, petty mouths and parliamentary proroguers. I also know that if I do not get satisfactory answers today, I can find him on the high street, at a botanical garden or at #rorywalks. Some of his fellow leadership contenders have called for his Department to be scrapped and the aid budget to be slashed, and his predecessor said that spending 0.7% of
national income was unsustainable. Will he take this opportunity to defend an independent DFID and 0.7%, and perhaps call on his fellow contenders to make their positions clear?

Rory Stewart: I thank the shadow Secretary of State for his remarks; his endorsement is probably the nail in the coffin of my campaign. I know that I am meant to be campaigning on being the person who can convince people who do not normally vote Conservative to vote Conservative, but this may be going a little far. The commitment to 0.7% is a Conservative commitment that we put into statute, and we are deeply proud of it. At a time when we are facing a climate emergency, to spend not 7% or 1%, but 0.7% of our GNI, makes entire sense. We are facing an emergency to the climate and to people that could cost trillions of pounds. If we get it wrong so this spending is exactly the right thing to do, and I am delighted that both sides of the House are following the Conservative lead on the commitment to 0.7%.

Dan Carden: I am grateful for that answer. The growing debt crisis in developing countries, with debt repayment increasing by 85% between 2010 and 2018, is of growing concern, and it is a crisis that diverts money from vital public services. Yesterday Labour announced plans for an overseas loans transparency Act. Will the Secretary of State join us and call on the Chancellor to commit to full transparency on loans to foreign Governments?

Rory Stewart: Having gone party political, I will now say that I am very happy to reach out and talk about this matter. Clearly, finance is key for development and the City of London is one of the major players. If we can get the right kind of capital into Africa, for example—where there is a huge amount of labour, with 18 million people a year coming into the labour force—and get that capital connected, we can transform those economies, but we can do so only if these are good loans. The problem at the moment is that too much money has gone in that has not been invested in infrastructure or productivity, but has instead found its way into some rather dubious bank accounts. It is in the interests of Britain, the City, the Government and the whole nation to ensure that the financing we put into development really drives development. I would be delighted to sit down and discuss this with the hon. Gentleman.

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): Since the Secretary of State's statement on Ebola just before the recess, has there been any positive progress in tackling this terrible outbreak?

Rory Stewart: I feel a little bit cheeky standing up to answer this question because the Minister of State, Department for International Development, my hon. Friend the Member for West Worcestershire (Harriet Baldwin), made a trip to the eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo last week to see the response on the ground. Essentially, there are three issues in relation to Ebola. The first is co-ordination issues for the World Health Organisation. The second is vaccination resources. The third is political issues between communities and the Government of the DRC. We have now put a considerable amount of resources in and we are getting the vaccines in on the ground. We have put more British staff on the ground to ensure that we can work with the UN, and in Kinshasa we are really focusing on ensuring that we can overcome the political problems that are driving communities away from the vaccination programme. It is a huge crisis, but Britain is stepping up and so, I am glad to say, is the United States.

T2. [911178] Danielle Rowley (Midlothian) (Lab): I am pleased to hear the Secretary of State's global approach to climate change, but we know that vulnerable communities in the global south are hit hardest by extreme weather events caused by climate change. How will he use his global influence to work with other funding countries to make sure that vital financial support goes to those countries that have suffered such loss and damage?

Rory Stewart: First, we have to leverage our position. We are almost the major donor—proportionally, certainly—to the World Bank, and we need to leverage that kind of support. There is, though, a bigger point: it is not just about money. For example, British scientists are doing something really interesting at Kew Gardens looking at drought-resistant crops, particularly coffee and cocoa. In somewhere such as Ghana, climate change could wipe out a large sector of the economy. We need to get shade trees in. We need new crops and irrigation techniques. This is of course about resources, but it is also a great deal about using British and international research and development and science to solve these problems in, as the hon. Lady said, the global south.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): Most victims of human trafficking come from developing countries. What is the Secretary of State's Department doing to end the scourge of human trafficking?

Rory Stewart: First, I pay huge tribute to my hon. Friend for the passion and commitment that he and many others have put into this issue. We do work on this. We have been particularly focused on the Nepali-Indian border, across which there is terrible trafficking taking place. These are very difficult things to deal with. We are talking about global crime. It involves working with communities in Nepal to educate women and identify instances of trafficking and working with the police and customs and ultimately finding an approach that stops both the misery there and our role in the UK in propagating that misery. I really am delighted that he has taken such a lead on this.

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): Since the Secretary of State's statement on Ebola just before the recess, has there been any positive progress in tackling this terrible outbreak?

Rory Stewart: We are very clear that we do not tie aid spending. There may be situations in which it is beneficial. For example, we have just put £70 million into British universities to find a universal cure for snake bites. That is a very good example of how we can solve a global health problem through investment in British universities, but that is not tied aid; it is because British research and development, particularly the Liverpool School of Tropical Medicine, is the leader in this area.1 We can do this in many areas without feeling ashamed of ourselves, benefiting Britain and the world, and without tying our aid.

[1. [Official Report, 10 June 2019, Vol. 661, c. 4MC.]]
T4. [911182] Ian C. Lucas (Wrexham) (Lab): Will the Secretary of State instruct DFID officials to carry out an audit through Members of Parliament to identify organisations in constituencies that are developing links with developing countries?

Rory Stewart: Yes. The absolutely greatest example of this is Scotland and Malawi. It has mapped thousands of amazing Scottish voluntary organisations working in Malawi and uncovered work that we had not begun to understand. It is a fantastic idea. I would love to see different regions of the UK taking the lead in partnerships with different countries and my Department understanding much better what British charities are doing. If we can get that right, we can get the enthusiasm and soul of the British people behind international development, which will ultimately be the best guarantee of the 0.7%.

T6. [911184] Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): I thank the Secretary of State for that very encouraging answer. I hope he will join me in welcoming the peaceful conclusion of the elections in Malawi, particularly the increased number of women MPs, even if that was slightly counterbalanced by the loss of some very good incumbents, including a friend of mine, Jacqueline Kouwenhoven, who you may remember meeting some years ago, Mr Speaker. The turnover of incumbents seems to be an increasing issue in democracies across Africa. What is his Department doing through the Westminster Foundation and other such organisations to strengthen democratic institutions and empower women in democracies?

Harriett Baldwin: Yes. As my right hon. Friend said, the Scotland-Malawi partnership is a very strong one, as the hon. Gentleman has shown with his question. In the recent elections, the results of which we have welcomed, some two thirds of the parliamentary seats in Malawi changed hands. I am not sure if they learned that level of turnover from recent experience in Scotland not so long ago.
Business of the House

10.45 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 (Mel Stride): The business for the week commencing 10 June will include:

Monday 10 June—Remaining stages of the National Insurance Contributions (Termination Awards and Sporting Testimonials) 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.

Tuesday 11 June—Motion to approve a statutory instrument relating to the draft Consumer Rights Act 2015 (Enforcement) (Amendment) Order 2019, followed by a motion to approve a statutory instrument relating to the draft Child Support (Miscellaneous Amendments) Regulations 2019, followed by a general debate on the UK voluntary national review on the sustainable development goals.

Wednesday 12 June—Opposition day (unlotted day). There will be a debate on inequality and social mobility, followed by a debate on discrimination in sport. Both debates will arise on a motion in the name of the official Opposition.

Thursday 13 June—Debate on a motion on social housing, followed by a general debate on making Parliament a more modern, family-friendly and accessible workplace. The subjects of these debates were determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

Friday 14 June—The House will not be sitting.

May I, on this particular occasion, extend the best wishes and thoughts of the whole House to all who are assembled in Normandy today to reflect on and commemorate the D-day landings?

It has been a very crowded field, with many runners and riders, but here I am as the new Leader of the House, and also as the new Lord President of the Council, which means that I have become a leader without an election and a lord without having to be elected to the peerage. For having quietly achieved that during these tumultuous times, I think I should be congratulated.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): You’ve already done it.

Mel Stride: Indeed I have.

I would like to pay tribute to my right hon. Friend the Member for South Northamptonshire (Andrea Leadsom). In so doing, Mr Speaker, may I say that I hope that we can continue in the warm and familiar spirit that characterised your relationship with my predecessor, and hope that I can benefit from your continued indulgence? My right hon. Friend travelled the length and breadth of our country to press the case for our Parliament. She worked particularly hard to change the culture in the Palace of Westminster so that there should be no place for bullying or harassment of any kind. We owe her a great debt.

I would also like briefly to pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Sherwood (Mark Spencer), who stood in at such short notice on the previous occasion and performed with such extraordinary brilliance and deference. His are big shoes to fill, not least because he has very large feet.

For my part, I will strive to be an effective voice for Parliament in Government and to conduct myself in a consensual and inclusive manner. My door will always be open to Members right across this House—especially, of course, to the hon. Member for Walsall South (Valerie Vaz), and all those who speak for their parties and the Committees of this House.

Beyond these walls, I will play my part to defend our democracy, in a world in which the public square has too often become a place of misinformation and abuse. This House is precious, yet sometimes fragile. When it is degraded, we are diminished, but when it is at its best, we are all enriched.

Valerie Vaz: I welcome the right hon. Gentleman to his new position and congratulate him on his appointment. Perhaps we can talk later about whether he is going to give a speech every time he announces the business; I am happy to have the extra time too. I thank him for giving the forthcoming business and for restoring our Opposition day. I am pleased that he is starting off in the right way—long may that continue.

Can the Leader of the House confirm the dates for the summer and conference recesses? I ask that not because I do not want to be here—we do want to be here—but because I have heard rumours that the House might rise on 19 July. There is a new timetable for the election of the Conservative leader, and we need to ensure that the House is not in recess when the new leader—effectively the new Prime Minister—takes up his or her post. Does he agree that it is vital for the House to have an immediate opportunity to test whether the new leader of the Conservative party commands the confidence of the House?

I remind the Leader of the House that he holds democracy in his hands, which is a very precious thing. This is a minority Government, and he needs to respect that. Can he confirm the status of the confidence and supply agreement and whether it will have to be renegotiated with the new Prime Minister? I am sure that he has been briefed, but I will give him the figure again: it is 715 days since the Queen’s Speech. This is now the longest continuous parliamentary Session since the Acts of Union in 1800.

The Leader of the House is the voice of the House in Government. Can he assure the House that he agrees that Parliament is sovereign, and that Parliament has voted against a no-deal scenario? I say that because there are many candidates up and down the country coming here to have coffee and tea and talk to their colleagues, and they are saying various things. I am sure that he still respects his former colleague at the Treasury, the Chancellor, who said that the Conservative party is at risk of losing its “reputation for fiscal responsibility” as candidates fighting for the top job have made “unfunded” spending and tax-cutting pledges. Are those meaningful or un-meaningful pledges? Are they new policies? We need to know. As a former Treasury Minister, he knows that when someone makes a public spending commitment, they have to honour it. One of them is even talking about repealing the Health and Social Care Act 2012.

[Official Report, 10 June 2019, Vol. 661, c. 4MC.]
Given that they have all been in the Cabinet, why did they not do those things at the time? Does that mean they are not very good at persuading their colleagues?

This Government are failing in their duty to bring forward important legislation. The Financial Services (Implementation of Legislation) Bill, the Immigration and Social Security Co-ordination (EU Withdrawal) Bill, the Agriculture Bill and the Fisheries Bill all need their Report stage, and the Trade Bill is stuck in ping-pong. Can the Leader of the House update us on when those Bills are likely to get their Report stage and when the Trade Bill will return to the House?

The House has resolved that there is a climate and environment emergency. I do not know about other Members, but I am already getting emails from people about the Environment Bill. The Environment Bill is required to put in place a domestic structure of environmental governance, but has yet to be published and is only in draft form. The draft Bill seems to exclude our cultural heritage from future environmental improvement plans. When the Leader of the House is having strategy meetings with his candidate, the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, can he ask him when the Environment Bill is likely to come before the House?

All the while, the UK manufacturing sector contracted in May for the first time since July 2016. The justice system is under threat while barristers are considering improvement plans. When the Leader of the House is meeting with his candidate, the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, can he promise more money for the Department of Justice?

Also at risk are children in Northamptonshire. Yesterday two Northamptonshire serious case reviews of the murder of two toddlers were published and widely reported, and they said that there was a serious failure, after child protection workers, police and the local authority missed crucial opportunities to intervene. An Ofsted inspection last year said that social workers and staff are in short supply. The Royal College of Radiologists recently said that the shortage of cancer doctors “puts care at risk”. Also at risk is the community of Scunthorpe and, we learn today, the community of Bridgend.

Mr Speaker, you can see why we need such debates. Given that the Government do not have the business or refuse to put business before this House, could the Opposition have that time because we could put forward how we see the future of this country? That is important because—and I join the right hon. Gentleman in saying this—on this day more than ever, we want to remember and thank the 22,442 British troops who gave their lives over the summer of 1944. They worked together to ensure, and they still ensure, peace and our freedom, fighting antisemitism, racism, fascism and injustice. Let us get this place and this country working so that we honour their sacrifice.

Mel Stride: I thank the hon. Lady for her comments, and particularly for welcoming me to my new role. I very much look forward to the great pleasure of working closely with her in the weeks and months ahead.

The hon. Lady asked several questions. She initially asked about recess and when we will be coming forward with the dates for recess. These matters are being considered in the normal manner at the moment, and I will come to the Dispatch Box to announce those dates in due course.

The hon. Lady raised an interesting question about a vote of no confidence and whether such a vote would be permissible. I think the desire to put forward such a motion is really something that originates from her side of the House, so I would suggest she speaks to the leader of her own party. I am aware that there is a lack of communication between the Back Benches and the Front Bench, but I did not realise that there is a lack of communication between the Front Bench and the leader of her own side. She would do well to speak to him in that respect.

The hon. Lady also raised the matter of the confidence and supply agreement. It is of course an agreement between the Conservative and Unionist party and the Democratic Unionist party, and I am therefore confident that it will not be affected by any change in the leadership of the Conservative and Unionist party.

The hon. Lady specifically asked whether Parliament is ultimately sovereign. Of course, the answer to that is very simple: it is yes. Parliament is the sovereign body within our constitution.

The hon. Lady raised—rather bravely, I thought—the issue of tax cuts, among other measures. That comes from a party that has pledged unfunded spending commitments approaching £1 trillion in total, and one can only imagine the kind—[Interruption.] I am looking at the shadow Chief Secretary to the Treasury, the hon. Member for Bootle (Peter Dowd), who is smirking away at the thought of all those tax cuts, which he knows he will be bringing in in the course of time. Meanwhile, our party has of course reduced tax left, right and centre, including the latest increase in the personal allowance in the last Budget, taking up to 3 million or 4 million of the lowest-paid people out of tax altogether since 2010.

The hon. Lady quite rightly turned to the issue of legislation and the Bills that will come before this House. I would remind her that no less than 44 Bills have received Royal Assent in this Session. To go back to her point about tax, that includes the last Finance Bill, which reduced tax for no less than 32 million hard-working people up and down our country.

Perhaps I should finish by saying that it is our joint desire to get business through the House—it seems we both have such a desire—and I very much look forward to working closely with the hon. Lady to make sure that the views and aspirations of those right across this House are fully met.

Sir David Amess (Southend West) (Con): I join others in paying tribute to the outgoing Leader of the House and congratulating my right hon. Friend on his appointment. Will he find time for a debate on future relations between the United Kingdom and the Maldives? The House will be delighted to know that, following the election of the new President, Ibrahim Solih, the warring factions have joined together and the Majlis is now sitting. The Maldives wants to rejoin the Commonwealth, and it would very much like a free trade agreement with the United Kingdom.

Mel Stride: I welcome my hon. Friend’s question—I know he is a welcome and regular fixture on these occasions, and I look forward to future questions from him.
Mel Stride: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his contribution. I have observed him from a distance over many weeks performing as he has done—he normally has a tightly knit script of prose that he rattles through at great speed, and we were not disappointed in that respect this morning. With his comments about zombies and other references there was something more of the Rab C. Nesbitt than the Rabbie Burns about it on this occasion—[Interruption.] I do have a soft spot for the hon. Gentleman, so he will make good headway with me on a general basis.

On SNP Opposition days, the hon. Gentleman raised a specific point about Prorogation, which of course is ultimately in the gift of the Queen. I think Her Majesty should be kept out of the politics of our Parliament, and I am sure that matter will be in the forefront for those who toy with such decisions in the future. He also mentioned the Bills being introduced, and I think many fine Bills are coming forward in this House, as well as many important debates. It should be borne in mind that debate does not just take place on the Floor of the House, and important work is also carried out in many important Committees.

Sir John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): It is good to see another one of my protégés climb the greasy pole.

Martin Luther King said that law and order exist for the purposes of justice, but the injustice of disorder hurts people and spoils places as too many yobs and crooks penalise, torment, terrorise and taunt their innocent and vulnerable neighbours. Small shops are targeted in particular. The Federation of Independent Retailers said recently that the cost of crimes against the convenience sector alone is £246 million. Will the Leader of the House arrange for a debate on retail crime, which does so much harm in all our constituencies? Then, perhaps, as well as being a Leader, as well as being a President, as well as being a Lord, he will, like me, become a champion of the shopkeepers.

Mr Speaker: Order. The right hon. Gentleman was legendarily eloquent and mellifluous, but it is extremely important that the proceedings of this House are intelligible to all those observing them. Therefore, for the purposes of clarification and the avoidance of doubt, I inform people that before the Leader of the House attained the giddy heights in the political stratosphere, which is he proud to announce today he has done, he did serve as Parliamentary Private Secretary to the right hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Sir John Hayes). I fancy that the right hon. Member thinks that that was the apogee of the career achievements of the right hon. Member for Central Devon (Mel Stride).

Mel Stride: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I think it is very important to put that important matter clearly on the record. May I say what a privilege and honour it was to have served as my right hon. and gallant Friend’s PPS? I always found him to be visionary, wise, and just occasionally present in the 21st century. [Laughter] I did stress the word “occasionally”, Mr Speaker, in that context.
My right hon. Friend is absolutely right in his important point about crime and our local communities. We tend to see local communities and high streets through the prism of taxation and, in particular, business rates, but he is right to raise the other issues that impinge on the health of our high streets and communities. If he were to suggest this issue for a Backbench Business debate to the Chair of the Backbench Business Committee, it might well find favour.

Ian Mearns (Gateshead) (Lab): I welcome the right hon. Gentleman to his new role and look forward to working with him as we try to sort out parliamentary business over the coming weeks and months.

I very much echo the comments about D-day and remember the terrible sacrifice that was made as the liberation of Europe began on 6 June 1944. I wonder whether we could also spare a moment to remember those, like my dad, who were anxiously waiting to be liberated in prisoner of war camps across Germany and other parts of Europe. They had done their bit, but were captured in doing so. They could not perform any further heroics during the war, but they were still serving their country in prisoner of war camps.

The likelihood is that there will be two days of estimates day debates in early July. The Backbench Business Committee is anxiously waiting for applications for estimates day debates by Friday 14 June. The Committee will make its deliberations on Tuesday 18 June and we will then have an idea of what four estimates day debates will take place on those two days in early July.

Finally, last night I attended a function to celebrate the Open University’s 50th birthday. The OU is still a real chance for those already in work or those who missed out on studying for higher level qualifications after school, and for many to requalify in the fast-moving and ever-changing world of work. There is, however, a sting in the tail, which is that we have witnessed a massive reduction in the number of students from the UK signing up to courses because of tuition fees for adult learners. May we have a debate in Government time, so we can highlight the ever-growing need for lifelong learning and the great potential the OU still offers to people across this country?

Mel Stride: The answer to that question is an interplay between when the contest within the Conservative party for the new leader is due to conclude and when the recess is announced to fall. As we certainly do not know the answer to the latter, and I am not sure that we entirely know the answer to the former, I think that the answer, unfortunately, is no, not necessarily.

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): There are reports today that Ford is planning to close its plant in south Wales. This would be a devastating blow to the 1,700 people who work there and for supply chains across Wales. May we have a statement from the Government on this dreadful situation and a programme of practical support for manufacturing in south Wales?

Mel Stride: I echo the hon. Gentleman’s concerns. Clearly, discussions are taking place, and I believe that senior executives from Ford America are taking part in them. We do not yet know the outcome of the discussions. No announcement has been made, although I am led to believe it is possible that one will be made later today. What I can assure him of is that this Government and the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, in particular, will keep a very close eye on developments and respond appropriately.

Mrs Pauline Latham (Mid Derbyshire) (Con): I welcome my right hon. Friend to his position and pay tribute to his predecessor, my right hon. Friend the Member for South Northamptonshire (Andrea Leadsom), who was in her place for a long time and did a lot of valuable work for the House.

May we have a statement or a debate on the Leader of the Opposition leading a student-type protest in Trafalgar Square against the leader of the free world when he purports to become the next Prime Minister? Is this appropriate?

Mel Stride: I respect the question, but I do not think it is for me to comment one way or the other on the decisions made by the Leader of the Opposition about which events or demonstrations he chooses to attend or
not to attend—other than to say that I am sure the public will have noticed, and I am sure the electorate will draw their own conclusions.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): Yesterday we had an excellent debate on hidden disabilities, but there are still several areas in which those with disabilities are being badly let down over accessibility. One of my constituents, Shirley Todd, has launched a campaign on that very issue. A particular problem is boarding aircraft. At most airports—including Edinburgh airport in my constituency, which has won several awards relating to accessibility—once passengers are beyond the gate they come up against a completely different set of circumstances, and are often literally manhandled on to the plane by baggage handlers. May we have a debate on the issue, and discuss how airlines and air transport services could be encouraged to tackle it a bit more sensitively?

Mel Stride: The hon. Lady raises a very important matter, particularly in the context of her constituent. The Government fund support for those with disabilities and long-term health conditions extensively, to the tune of some £55 billion a year. However, the specific issue of getting on and off aeroplanes might lend itself to an Adjournment debate, which would give the hon. Lady an opportunity to question a Minister in detail. I also refer her to Transport Questions, which will take place on Thursday 13 June.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): In a week in which Muslims across the world have celebrated the end of Ramadan, the crisis in Sri Lanka seems to be increasing still further, with the resignation of all the Muslim Ministers and officials in the Sri Lankan and state Governments. Today, in the other place, Lord Naseby is putting a question about travel advice given to UK citizens. I note that there has been no statement from the Government about either travel advice or the crisis. May we have a debate on the issue, and discuss how airlines and air transport services could be encouraged to tackle it a bit more sensitively?

Mel Stride: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right: we should seek whatever means we can to pay tribute to those who fought on our behalf in the second world war. He mentioned the planting of trees. I remember that when I was a young boy, we were urged to “Plant a tree in ‘73”, and I assume that there are forests of giant trees today as a consequence of that initiative. The planting of the great northern forest is an excellent and imaginative approach; I think that the Government intend to plant about 15 million trees. As for the hon. Gentleman’s specific point, Environment questions, on Thursday week, will provide an excellent opportunity to raise it with Ministers.

Douglas Ross (Moray) (Con): May we have a debate about the Queen’s award for voluntary service? This year Forres in Bloom received the honour. Diane McGregor, the chairwoman, Sandra McLennan, the secretary, and all the volunteers do outstanding work throughout the year in Grant park and across Forres with their flowers and displays. This is appreciated by not just locals but the thousands of visitors to the town. Will the Leader of the House also join me in congratulating them on all these efforts, ahead of their 30th anniversary next year, in their three decades of work and agree that their motto is very fitting: “We love where we live”?

Mel Stride: My hon. Friend raises an excellent point, and I do of course join him in paying tribute to Diane McGregor, Sandra McLennan and the amazing band of volunteers for their outstanding work and for receiving the Queen’s award for voluntary service. The Government recognise the huge importance of volunteering and it would be an excellent subject for an Adjournment debate.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): I warmly congratulate the new Leader of the House, although I will not do your trick, Mr Speaker, of reminding him of where we first met as it would be far too embarrassing for me. May I just say that I think his answers on Prorogation and whether a new Prime Minister will address the House swiftly after being elected have been wholly inadequate so far? It would surely be on a Venezuelan scale of outrage if we were to prorogue Parliament simply to force through a no-deal Brexit against the will of Parliament. Even Winston Churchill—during the midst of war when the British Expeditionary Force was in danger of complete collapse in France and we were trying to get people out of Dunkirk—when he was made Prime Minister in May 1940 addressed the House of Commons just three days later. Even the Marquess of Salisbury in 1885 knew he had to come to Parliament the next day. So surely to God the new Leader of the House should be able to say to us today, “Yes, a new Prime Minister will address the House of Commons within a week of being appointed.”

Mel Stride: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question, and I am not quite as shy as him about revealing to the House where we first met: I was very proud to meet the hon. Gentleman. I think for the first
time as a fully signed up member of the Conservative party at Oxford University. Quite where it all went wrong after that I have no idea, but if the hon. Gentleman wants to come and talk to me about the error of his ways at any point I will be happy to try to enlighten him on those matters.

The hon. Gentleman raises once again the issue of Prorogation, and he will know that these matters and others are all going to be decisions that the future Prime Minister will take and that it is not for me to speculate about what they might be.

Mr Speaker: One thing we all know, because I have said it myself several times—and I think the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) believes this—is that Parliament will not be evacuated from the centre stage of the decision-making process on this important matter. That is simply not going to happen; it is so blindingly obvious that it almost does not need to be stated—but apparently it does and therefore I have done.

Nigel Huddleston (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): May I also welcome the very modern-minded Leader of the House to his role? With that in mind, he may be aware that in 1989 when cameras were first allowed in this place they were brought in with restrictions: footage can be used on news programmes and so on, but not on satirical or light entertainment programmes, presumably to maintain the dignity of this place. Given that so much of this content, in particular the more light-hearted moments—a lot of it including you, Mr Speaker—is currently available online on YouTube and so on does the Leader of the House believe it is about time to update the rules and bring them into the 21st century?

Mel Stride: I am sure there are many light-hearted and satirical moments in the House—too many for any producer of any film to get their head around, I would imagine. However, whether we should permit this might be the subject of a future debate, rather than my opining on it at the Dispatch Box.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): Unfortunately, many foreign-born citizens and others with the right to live and work in the UK are being made to feel like second-class citizens. This happened a couple of weeks ago to EU citizens who were turned away from polling stations, and last week at my surgery. Firas Ibrahim, the regional director for the middle east at the University of Edinburgh, came to tell me that, despite the fact that he loves living and working in Scotland, he feels that the UK Government are making him feel like a second-class citizen. Despite holding a British passport and fulfilling an important role at a Russell Group university, he has been repeatedly questioned by border officials on returning from business trips abroad, and as a dual Syrian national, he was very upset by border officials on returning from business trips abroad, and as a dual Syrian national, he was very upset by border officials on returning from business trips abroad, and as a dual Syrian national, he was very upset by border officials on returning from business trips abroad.

Mel Stride: I think it is fair to say that our Prime Minister has done a huge amount to ensure that we reassure those EU nationals who live in our country that they are not only entirely welcome but an essential part of our communities and our society. The hon. and learned Lady raised a specific point about voting, and my comment would be that the Government ensured that we provided all the legal requirements and funding to facilitate that, and that the returning officers had the tools at their disposal to enable them to take the appropriate decisions. We will have Home Office questions on Monday, and she might wish to raise that issue with Ministers at that time.

Nick Herbert (Arundel and South Downs) (Con): I warmly congratulate my right hon. Friend on assuming his position. May we have a debate on the replenishment of the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria? It is absolutely essential that the UK not only maintains its generous commitment but increases it, as a congressional appropriations sub-committee has just recommended that the United States should do. We need a proportionate increase to ensure that those deadly diseases can be tackled, and an early decision by the Government is now necessary so that they can continue to show the global leadership on this issue that they have shown in the past.

Mel Stride: I congratulate my right hon. Friend on his work in this area and on his chairmanship of the Global TB Caucus. The Government recognise the importance of the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria, and we are in fact the world’s third-largest contributor to it. We are currently considering a further commitment to the fund’s replenishment this year, and I will ensure that my right hon. Friend’s points are noted.

Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP): I was under the impression that the new Leader of the House’s most important previous role was his position on the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee in 2010. That position has allowed him to speak with accuracy and clarity on the state of the confidence and supply agreement, and I hope that he will continue to develop his relationship with the people on the Ulster Bench. Will he take this opportunity today to commend the work of the education and engagement team in Parliament and to support them as they try to fill the gap to ensure that their brilliant work in reaching 11,000 children every year is extended to Northern Ireland, where only 37 children were reached last year?

Mel Stride: I echo my hon. Friend’s warm comments about our time together on the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee. I remember that time with fondness, when he and I worked on a lot of important matters. His point about education and engagement and the relatively low number of children coming from Northern Ireland seems to me—although I have not looked into this in great detail—to be something that might need to be addressed. I would therefore be happy to meet him to look at this more carefully.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): I should like to add my congratulations to the new Leader of the House. Earlier, my right hon. Friend the Member for South
Holland and The Deepings (Sir John Hayes) referred to the problems faced by small shopkeepers. He and I attended an event yesterday that was organised by the National Federation of Retail Newsagents. As well as the issue of retail crime, they drew our attention to the anomalies in the business rates system that are having a damaging impact on them. Could the Leader of the House find time for a debate on that issue?

**Mel Stride:** I thank my hon. Friend for his question, and for mentioning my right hon. Friend the Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Sir John Hayes) again; may I say once again what a deep honour it was to serve as his PPS?

On business rates and high streets, this Thursday there will be BEIS questions, and that would be an opportune moment for my hon. Friend the Member for Cleethorpes (Martin Vickers) to raise the point that he has made.

**Paula Sherriff** (Dewsbury) (Lab): A constituent of mine is in the process of applying for a visa, but she has experienced technical problems online and is attempting to resolve the issue by phone. It would appear that the helpline—I use that term in the broadest sense—has been outsourced, and the company being used is charging £2.50 per minute for calls. She has already spent over £100 and is absolutely no nearer to getting the problem resolved. I thought the Government had told us that the hostile environment was over; it clearly is not. May we have a statement urgently on what the Government will do about that helpline?

**Mel Stride:** I am pleased that the hon. Lady has raised that matter, because there are a number of companies out there who purport to do things which, apparently, are too complicated to do for nothing, and make profits as a consequence. I personally believe in general terms that that is not right, and I would be happy to facilitate a conversation perhaps between the hon. Lady and the appropriate Minister.

**Jeremy Lefroy** (Stafford) (Con): I very much support what my right hon. Friend the Member for Arundel and South Downs (Nick Herbert) said about the global health fund.

May we have a debate on the importance of smaller accident and emergency units up and down the country? Yet again, County Hospital, Stafford has come into the limelight. It is actually performing excellently at the moment. However, there is no way that the local health system—indeed, the regional health system—could survive without the A&E there and, indeed, the one a few miles away in Telford. May we have a debate so that we can highlight that, and ask for a different model for funding those vital smaller general hospitals up and down our country?

**Mel Stride:** My hon. Friend, who is a great champion for his local hospital, raises the issue of smaller A&E units in general. We are, of course, investing the largest cash amount in the national health service in its history—some £85 billion over the next five years—and we are fully committed to the NHS. The point that he raised might make a good BackBench Business Committee debate, or perhaps even a Westminster Hall debate when it is the Department for Health’s turn to respond.

**Mr Paul Sweeney** (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): From an early age I have been a real champion of, and been fascinated by, Glasgow’s built heritage. In particular, most people would associate Glasgow’s iconic tenements with the city. Indeed, 76,000 tenements were built in Glasgow before 1919, of which over 60% are in need of urgent repair. Would the Leader of the House consider congratulating pupils at Whitehill Secondary School who developed a Go4SET engineering project to look at future-proofing and greening Glasgow’s tenements, and surpassed 91 other secondary schools by winning the Go4SET national competition? Would he consider building on their excellent achievements and work by holding a debate in the House, in Government time, on the need to provide practical support for improving our historic built environment—particularly looking at measures such as VAT relief for historic buildings?

**Mel Stride:** I thank the hon. Gentleman for drawing attention to the schools that he referred to, particularly Whitehill Secondary School, and the competition that was won around the greening of buildings. He is right to raise our historic buildings and our heritage; they are extremely important, especially in local communities. He referenced some tax measures that may assist in that area. I would be very happy to write on his behalf to the Treasury, or facilitate a meeting with the Treasury to discuss those matters.

**Ben Lake** (Ceredigion) (PC): Will the Leader of the House make time for a debate on the support that the Government can provide to industry at this deeply challenging time? As my hon. Friend the Member for Blaenau Gwent (Nick Smith) mentioned earlier, there are deeply worrying reports this morning about the future of car manufacturing at Bridgend, which faces the pressures of reduced demand for conventional combustion engines and Brexit uncertainty. It is imperative that industry is given the support to transition to new technology and a more sustainable footing, so a debate on the role that Government can play in that endeavour is urgently needed.

**Mel Stride:** The hon. Gentleman will no doubt be aware of the extensive industrial strategy that the Government have committed to. He will be aware of the reduction in corporation tax rates that we have been bringing in, and the reliefs around industrial strategy—all the things that are important in ensuring that our businesses are sustainable, growing and strong. I think the subject might make quite an interesting debate, so perhaps it is one to propose to the Backbench Business Committee.

**Lilian Greenwood** (Nottingham South) (Lab): Last Thursday I joined local residents of all ages at “Jumpers for Goalposts,” a community football event organised by my constituent Pete Bell, alongside students from Farnborough Academy, and supported by the police, the armed forces, the Prison Service, the city council, Nottingham Forest and many others. Pete is using his experience of delivering “Step Out, Stay Out,” a prison football programme, to strengthen community cohesion...
on the Clifton estate, where he lives. Will the new Leader of the House congratulate Pete and the students on the event, and will the Government make time to debate the vital role that sport-based education and mentoring can play in both helping offenders to turn their lives around and preventing young people from getting involved in crime and antisocial behaviour in the first place?

**Mel Stride**: That may be an excellent subject for an Adjournment debate and, therefore, for a close discussion with the responsible Minister. I will certainly join the hon. Lady in congratulating Pete Bell and the “Jumpers for Goalposts” initiative.

**Mr Speaker**: In joining those congratulations, it seems opportune to point out that the women’s parliamentary football team scored a great victory last night—2-1, I am advised—at a match in Battersea Park.

**Valerie Vaz**: They lost.

**Mr Speaker**: I was told they had won 2-1. By all accounts it was a splendid performance, and I think colleagues will wish to congratulate all members of the team. [Interruption.] I note the sedentary chunter of the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant), which probably would bear repetition, but I will spare the House at this time.

**John Grogan** (Keighley) (Lab): Will the Leader of the House consider scheduling a debate on early-day motion 2455, on the theme of sport and free-to-air TV?

**Mr Speaker**: That this House celebrates a successful start to the summer of sport but regrets that a lot of sport is broadcast on subscription TV which is unavailable live to most people in the UK; notes that the European Nations Football League finals is available free to air in three of the four participating countries: the Netherlands, Portugal and Switzerland, but not England; regrets the fact that BT Sport tried to fulfil its promise to make the European Champions League final available to all viewers by offering it on a flickering YouTube channel rather than through a main public service broadcaster; further regrets that no start to sport world cup matches have been available live on free to air to inspire future generations; welcomes the fact that the 2019 FIFA Women’s World Cup and Netball World Cup will be broadcast live on the BBC but notes that no female team sport has been accorded the status of a listed event which must be offered to broadcasters with reach across the population; calls on Sky TV to allow the final of the Cricket World Cup to be simulcast on Channel 4; and calls on the Government to undertake a review of the listed events with a view to extending such events.

The early-day motion argues the case for extending the list of events that must be offered live to free-to-air TV, given that much of our glorious summer of sport—the cricket World Cup; the UEFA Nations League finals, which England are involved in tonight; and the Open golf championship at Portrush—is hidden away behind subscription TV. Even the Champions League final was available to many only on a grainy YouTube channel.

**Mel Stride**: These arrangements are clearly subject to a variety of commercial contracts and arrangements between businesses. As to the suggestion of our having a debate, I invite the hon. Gentleman to write to me setting out precisely the arguments he is putting forward and what he wishes to be debated. I would then be very happy to have a much closer look.

**Kevin Brennan** (Cardiff West) (Lab): I did not agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) when he was a member of the Oxford University Conservative association, but I agree with him when he challenges the new Leader of the House to be much clearer about his constitutional position in relation to proroguing Parliament. Will the Leader of the House now make it absolutely clear from the Dispatch Box that he would oppose any future Prime Minister who proposes Prorogation in order to avoid this House being able to express its view on a difficult constitutional matter such as Brexit? As Leader of the House, he needs to be clear that that is his position.

**Mel Stride**: If I may say so, Mr Speaker, both your interjection on this matter and my previous answers cover the hon. Gentleman’s point.

**Douglas Chapman** (Dunfermline and West Fife) (SNP): Today the oil company Hurricane Energy has started production in a giant oilfield west of Shetland—the output is expected to be 20,000 barrels a day. Will the Leader of the House agree to a debate in Government time on how we transition to a much greener economy and transfer all current oil and gas revenues to the Scottish Exchequer so that they can be used much more productively and wisely in future, and not be frittered away by the UK Government?

**Mel Stride**: That is probably best a question for Scotland questions, which are on Wednesday 19 June.

**Nick Thomas-Symonds** (Torfaen) (Lab): I welcome the Leader of the House to his new role. We urgently need a national debate on social care. As a first step, can we at least have a statement indicating when the Green Paper in respect of England will be published and offering proper resources for immediate social care needs all around the United Kingdom?

**Mel Stride**: The Government have made a number of announcements about additional funding for adult social care in particular. There will be a Green Paper, as the hon. Gentleman has identified, and it will come forward at the earliest opportunity.

**Mr Speaker**: The last thing the Speaker wants to do is to mislead the House. I have just been shown what appears to be conclusive evidence that the team eventually lost 3-2. I had been advised of a 2-1 victory, but perhaps it was a 2-1 lead. Apparently, the team lost, but they had a great time. There are magnificent players in that team, and I think we should celebrate the merits, commitment and passion of the women’s parliamentary football team. They may have lost the battle, but they will win the war.

**Paul Blomfield** (Sheffield Central) (Lab): It is almost three years since I reassured students at Sheffield Park Academy, in my constituency, that the Government were acting to introduce sharia-compliant student loans. That was on the basis of a pledge made in the higher
education White Paper, which had just been published at that time, but nothing followed. In May this year, the universities Minister implied that the issue would be addressed by Philip Augur, but his report, published last week, barely mentions it. May we therefore have a statement from the Education Secretary on when the Government intend to fulfil their promise to Muslim students?

Mel Stride: I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising that issue of sharia-compliant loans on behalf of pupils at Sheffield Park Academy. Within the Treasury, that comes under the responsibilities of the Economic Secretary. As the hon. Gentleman has suggested, the Department for Education also has important input on it. If he would like to contact me, I would be happy to make sure I facilitate appropriate contacts with the Treasury—if that is appropriate—and certainly with the DFE.

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): May I say that an ability to make glory out of a football defeat qualifies you for honorary membership of the tartan army, Mr Speaker.

On 1 May, a constituent of mine and his colleagues received an email from the subcontracting firm they worked for telling them that the company was being placed into administration, leaving them out of pocket by £1,000 each. They were successfully taken on by the main contractor, but in the five weeks since then the employer has refused all attempts to communicate with him. He has failed to give his employees notification of who the administrator is—if indeed an administrator has been appointed. The Gazette has no notice of liquidation, and Companies House records, as of this morning, do not record the fact that the company is in the process of closing down. So may we have a debate, in Government time, on not only the protection of workers’ rights when a company genuinely does go into administration, but what protections there might be in order to avoid paying its workers their due wages?

Mel Stride: The hon. Gentleman raises a specific point about the experience that one of his constituents is having with a particular business, and on that aspect of his question I would be happy to facilitate contact, perhaps with an appropriate Minister at the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, to see what possibilities there are. On the general point he makes on policy on administration, we have BEIS questions on Tuesday coming and he may wish to raise the issue then. Equally, he may wish to consider it for a Westminster Hall debate, perhaps when BEIS is the Department due to answer those debates.

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): I recently introduced a ten-minute rule Bill on animal sentience. When I asked the relevant Minister about it before the Select Committee, he said that the Government were just looking for a “vehicle” and parliamentary time in order to bring forward such a proposal, which I believe was promised back in 2017. Clearly, I can provide the vehicle; I have been working with animal welfare groups on draft legislation. When we look at next week’s business, we think, “Why can’t we just crack on with it?”

Mel Stride: First, I congratulate the hon. Lady on the huge amount of effort she puts into the very important area of animal welfare, something to which this Government are totally committed; she will be aware of the many measures we have brought in during this Parliament. She asks what legislative vehicle there might be to further the issue of animal sentience that she has raised. I would like to give that some thought, and if she would like to have a conversation with me after questions, I would be happy to talk to her specifically about it.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): The Leader of the House’s predecessor was a keen supporter of breastfeeding, so I am sure he will be keen to congratulate all volunteers in Volunteers’ Week and all those in Scotland who are involved in Scottish Breastfeeding Week, which happens to coincide with Volunteers’ Week. May we have a debate on the “Becoming Breastfeeding Friendly Scotland” recommendations, which are part of a global project in which England is also involved, in conjunction with Yale University and other countries around the world?

Mel Stride: I thank the hon. Lady for raising the issue. She is absolutely right that breastfeeding was very important to the previous Leader of the House, and I recognise its importance, too. The extent of breastfeeding in the United Kingdom is below that in many other countries, most notably Sweden, where a high proportion of babies are breastfed. I recognise that it does matter and that it does make a difference. Perhaps a debate in Westminster Hall at the appropriate moment might be the right approach.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): I welcome the Leader of the House to his new job. He and I have done business together over a period of time, so I wish him well in the job.

May I also associate myself with his remarks and those of my hon. Friend the Member for Walsall South (Valerie Vaz) about the D-day landings and the sacrifices that those men made? The Leader of the House will probably know that Coventry suffered as a result of the bombing. There are lots of services in Coventry today because the people of Coventry, like those in the rest of Britain, appreciate the sacrifices of those men.

May we have a debate or statement on the national school breakfast programme? I am told that it has been a great success, but there is concern about future funding. Bearing in mind the fact that 20,000 people in Coventry used food banks last year, and that we still have the working poor, I am sure the Leader of the House will be sympathetic to getting us a statement or a debate, because he is a humane person and understands that the longer it takes to get a decision, the longer children will suffer from anxiety.

Mel Stride: I associate myself entirely with the hon. Gentleman’s comments about the D-day landings, and I recognise the enormous damage and destruction that was caused to Coventry by the bombing in the second world war. May I congratulate him on securing an Adjournment debate on his local hospital next Thursday? I look forward either to being present at that debate or to reading Hansard after it.
The school breakfasts programme might be a good subject for an Adjournment debate, so that the hon. Gentleman can have a discussion with a Minister across the Dispatch Box.

Stuart C. McDonald (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): Sacred Heart and St Lucy’s in Cumbernauld are among the churches up and down the country that have close and long-standing links with priests, ministers and other religious leaders from overseas—people who come to lead and support worship while regular pastors are on vacation. May we have an urgent debate on the changes to the immigration rules that are set to destroy those links and make that recruitment impossible?

Mel Stride: The best forum for furthering the hon. Gentleman’s point would be Home Office questions on Monday.

Mr Speaker: I thank the Leader of the House for his debut performance at the Dispatch Box. It has been a stimulating occasion with the airing of many important topics. I can say to him without fear of contradiction that any warmth from him to me will be duly reciprocated.

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. The new Leader of the House was asked three times about the prospect of Prorogation being used to facilitate a no-deal Brexit. I listened carefully to his responses, and I do not think I heard him rule out such a prospect. We know that it is a live prospect because several of the candidates to become the new Prime Minister have said that it is something they intend to do. Will you, Mr Speaker, lay out for the House what the seeking of such a Prorogation would involve and what the responsibilities, duties and rights of the House would be in the matter?

Mr Speaker: I am extremely grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his point of order. I hope that he will understand if I decline to do that today, here and now. If I were minded to make further comments beyond those that I have made, I would do so at a future time and on a prepared basis. Suffice it to say that I have said what I have said and have nothing to add to or to subtract from what I have said on a number of recent occasions, including this morning. However, the hon. Gentleman is a perspicacious and adroit parliamentarian. He was that before he became his party’s shadow Leader of the House, and he has demonstrated clearly that he remains that in his current role. The issue has been aired by him and by the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant), and of course by the shadow Leader of the House in the first instance—her lead has been followed—and I feel that the matter will continue to be aired for as long as colleagues feel that it has to be. We will leave it there for now, but the way was led by the shadow Leader of the House and others of us have followed.
Backbench Business

Grenfell Tower Fire

11.50 am

Emma Dent Coad (Kensington) (Lab): I beg to move, That this House has considered the response to the Grenfell Tower fire.

I wish to thank the Backbench Business Committee, the Minister, the Government Members who agreed to support the debate, my colleagues here today and those who have given me strength and help over the past two years, but who are, I hope, on the battlefield of the Peterborough by-election today. I also thank those in the Public Gallery who are watching the debate. I want to reassure them that this debate is just one step and that we will return to this subject over and again until all our demands are met.

I asked for briefings on all aspects of the response to the Grenfell Tower fire from organisations and groups that I have met. I was inundated. I received enough information for a two-hour lecture with slides, but I have just 15 minutes in which to speak today. To preserve this invaluable response, all the briefings will be available online very soon in the Grenfell archive that I am compiling—it will be factual information. In the short time available, I will speak on areas close to my heart and leave comments on the detailed issues to my hon. Friends and other Members.

Just four days after my election two years ago, a horrific and an entirely avoidable atrocity took place in my neighbourhood. Shock and disbelief resonated around the world. Pledges, commitments and guarantees were made in this House in the aftermath. Many of these commitments have been broken, and my community has been failed horribly. A year ago, a debate was held in Westminster Hall about the response to the disaster. The briefing from members of Grenfell United and the request was clear: they wanted the Government to demand that the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea Council rehouse those people made homeless by the fire within a certain timeframe and that if the council continued to fail, the Government would send in commissioners to take it over. They also demanded that the Government appoint two independent panel members from diverse backgrounds to advise the public inquiry. It took a further year to appoint the panel members, and their very late arrival after phase 1 had ended will surely reduce their effectiveness.

I commend the work of Grenfell United in its tireless campaign to hold the council and the Government to account, often in very difficult circumstances. I also commend the work of the countless campaign and community groups fighting against the odds for Grenfell-affected people, including Humanity for Grenfell, the Grenfell Trust, Justice4Grenfell, the Latimer arts project, Kids on the Green, Hope for Grenfell, Grenfell Speaks, Cornwall Hugs Grenfell and all those other groups that I may have forgotten. I thank the community centres, religious centres and the vast number of outside campaigns and individuals whose breadth of expertise and support is evidence of the depth and breadth of the failure of the statutory services that we have paid for to care for the people to whom they have a duty of care. Let us look for a moment at rehousing. I must declare an interest as a current member of the council—I will remain a member of that council until every single person has been housed and cared for in the way that they deserve. The Government have failed to make the demands of the council that were made a year ago, and the council has failed to rehouse many people who were made homeless. The official figure is 19 tenants, but a tenant can comprise a household of many people with disparate needs. Only those made homeless from the tower and the facing Grenfell Walk are counted in those official statistics. In the walkways attached to the tower, there are a further 109 homeless households as of last month, making a total of 128 homeless households. Some remain in their homes, which re-traumatises them every day. The council has removed those households from the wider Grenfell rehousing scheme, and they will now languish on the council waiting list, some for many, many years.

While desperate families struggle to keep going, there is frustration and impatience within the council. Although there are good and empathic officers, this impatience is demonstrated by outbursts from some people because they are overstretched, and from certain senior councillors who should know better, while they persuade, cajole and sometimes, I am sorry to say, bully people into homes that are not suitable. While these 128 homeless households—around 250 people, in my estimation—are still awaiting rehousing, the rank incompetence of Kensington and Chelsea Tenant Management Organisation to have an up-to-date list of tenants at the time of the fire means that fraudsters have sneaked into the system and pillaged funds meant for the genuinely homeless and desperate.

During my tenure on the TMO board from 2008 to 2012, along with the now leader of the council, the TMO was so dysfunctional that I had to call in an independent adjudicator. There followed a change of director, but clearly not of culture or of staff. Meanwhile, the attitude of some people at the council is questionable, and I have noted that for years some people have found it almost feudal.

In the early days after the fire, my predecessor as MP wrote to the council to air her concern about the numbers of people roaming around the streets “like gangs”. A senior council officer was told to go down to the site but refused, saying, “It’s like little Africa down there.” Another said that the area was full of people “from the tropics”. A senior officer regularly, in front of others, referred to my neighbours as “muzzies”. A recent visitor to the walkways was congratulated by a senior councillor for entering the “lion’s den”. I say “vulnerable”, they say “volatile”. This attitude is hardly surprising. About two years ago during a debate on refugee children, a senior councillor said: “if we let these people in, we will have an Islamic Caliphate in Kensington and Chelsea.”

Racism or snobbery—take your pick.

What I see is people who have been utterly failed by the system subsequently being punished for it. Is it right to off-roll a child from school because they cannot cope with the pressure of trauma and schoolwork, and send them to a pupil referral unit or alternative provision located in a council-owned building, which is then closed because it is in such a poor state of repair that it is judged to be dangerous? According to parents who
confide in me, these children have been left to roam the streets. Who is responsible for safeguarding these fragile children? Is it another case of accountability pass the parcel?

Is it right to punish a bereaved man beside himself with grief and anger—someone who has been a good friend to many people—who in a moment of blind fury on behalf of others used threatening words? Is it right to punish this moment of fury with imprisonment? Should we imprison someone who has been so dramatically failed? I say, “Free Mr Latimer,” so he can at least join the memorial event on Friday week for those he lost on 14 June 2017. Why are my neighbours being punished, excluded from school and imprisoned when the perpetrators of their misery, who continue to view us with disdain, walk the streets of Chelsea free?

I am reliably informed that a senior councillor recently complained, “I don’t know why they are wasting so much time on mental health. They all seem fine to me.” I declare an interest as a recipient of mental health services, although they have not helped me. We have 11,000 people affected to various degrees by the Grenfell atrocity in our neighbourhood. Some have been helped; many have not. The type of trauma we have does not go away. There have been several suicides. While it is always difficult to ascertain causes, the five people I know of who lost their lives in the past seven months were affected by what happened to various degrees. This heavy toll includes young teenagers.

I am still meeting people who are not getting any help and some who are refusing help because of the perceived shame of mental illness. I suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder myself, but I am able to function. However, I know so many who cannot. On their behalf, I will wear the scars of my own mental ill health with pride. The shame is not for those whose mental health has been damaged. The shame lies with those who neglected our homes—those whose first reaction to the fire was that of damage limitation and passing the buck of blame, rather than accepting failure.

Local people and specialists have also been discredited over the controversial soil testing exercises. Members of the community concerned about toxicity of soil in the area around the tower contacted a university professor of fire chemistry and toxicity, who took samples and was so alarmed that she reported it to the council, Public Health England and the NHS. For some reason, they sat on these interim findings, and then six months later, the council leader denied in public that she had seen them, even though we have seen the minutes of the meeting at which she was informed of them.

After a long and failed campaign by the council and from other quarters to discredit the professor, they are now finally—after two long years—starting to test the soil for carcinogens and other toxic materials that can seriously affect people’s health. We are calling for full health screening, including blood and DNA testing; they are offering lung capacity tests. It is another fight they have sapped the energy of so many unnecessarily.

I turn briefly to the wealth of information we have had from the fire services, building regulators, the Royal Institute of British Architects and the Association of British Insurers, which all have an interest, from various perspectives, in the safety of buildings and those who live and work within them. All this will be available in the Grenfell archive. I have worked closely with the fire brigade and the Fire Brigades Union for many years. The cuts to services have been devastating, and I pay tribute to the fire services for their extraordinary dedication.

They often work long hours and double shifts to keep the service functioning. I well remember the previous Mayor of London, when challenged at a public Greater London Assembly meeting, uttering a foul expletive that I shall not repeat. The Minister may have witnessed it.

The independent review of building regulations and fire safety, the Hackitt review, includes many recommendations that fire services have put forward, including improving skills in the sector, defining who is responsible for what under fire safety legislation and increasing the role of the fire service in the safety of buildings, which, owing to deregulation, is currently open to all comers. The demand for the inclusion of sprinklers to all new buildings and for the retrofitting of residential buildings is consistent from many quarters. It costs money but not a lot, and not having them can have a terrible human cost that I have no wish to see imposed on anyone. Today, my hon. Friends will speak in more detail about improved regulation for fire doors, about responsibility for fire safety within the trained professional setting of fire services themselves and about regulating for safer electrical goods.

As many here will know, I spent most of my career writing about design and architecture. I know how buildings are constructed and what went wrong at Grenfell during the refurbishment. During my time on the TMO, work was done on digital cabling to Trellick Tower, which has the same concrete frame construction. During this work, firebreaks had not been reinstated. Fortunately, I was alerted to this by tenants, and after a row, these defects were corrected. Since that time, there have been several fires in Trellick Tower, all of which have been contained within a single flat.

The RIBA has specific demands that are more extensive than the recommendations in the Hackitt report. Its demands for non-combustible cladding, the use of sprinklers and alternative means of escape in new buildings would add just a few percentage points to the cost of buildings and keep people safe.

Sandy Martin (Ipswich) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that, however good building regulations might be, if developers can get away with not having them signed off, they are of no use? In St Francis Tower in Ipswich, in my constituency, a developer completely refurbished a tower block with flammable cladding without ever getting the building regulations signed off, because it did not have to do so through the local council.

Emma Dent Coad: I agree entirely with my hon. Friend. I will move now to the question of insurance, which might have been relevant in this case. The ABI has been working closely with the Fire Protection Association to reform building regulations, including on its review of Approved Document B. This relates not only to saving life; saving property is also paramount. If someone escapes a catastrophic fire in their home, they will have lost all their possessions and documents, and this can set them back years. They may never recover. A catastrophic fire in an office or warehouse not only destroys the contents and building; it can destroy a business, the jobs of all those who work there and the future of their work and family life, as well as all the organisations that depend on the business.

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The ABI is demanding that sprinklers be fitted to homes, student accommodation, schools, care homes and warehouses. It is also concerned—as am I, with my background in architecture—with the implications of modern methods of construction, many of which have not been fire tested to destruction and do not perform well under more stringent tests. The results of tests I have seen argue against the wholesale embrace in the architectural profession of cross-laminated timber, particularly in the production of the next generation of social housing, which we so desperately need. I know that colleagues will discuss that later. The Shelter report on social housing has been a welcome piece of research whose recommendations I hope, in time, will be adopted. We need more homes for social rent, but they must be the right homes in the right places.

Mary Creagh (Wakefield) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making a very powerful and important speech. My Committee heard from Professor Anna Stec about her concerns about the way that these combustible panels are being used in warehouse, school and hospital constructions that are exempt from the Government’s review of the new regulations post the Hackitt review. Does my hon. Friend agree that the Government need to look more widely at the use of flame retardants in these panels and the way in which these buildings are being constructed, to avoid tragedies in the future?

Emma Dent Coad: I thank my hon. Friend for that hugely helpful intervention. That work is ongoing and we must reach conclusions soon. We cannot put toxic chemicals in mattresses, foam furniture and so on too near people, including babies. There is a wealth of information out there, and we must listen and learn.

The public inquiry has been subject to criticism and a lot of delays. While we wait for the interim report, now expected in October, there are serious concerns whether it will make any recommendations at all and stop the merry-go-round of speculation about whether meaningful change will come from this detailed and forensic process. We believe that phase 2 will now begin in the new year, prolonging the pain and anxiety of those who have to give evidence, plus those awaiting justice for the perpetrators of what some have called “social murder”.

The police investigation is struggling for funds, having asked for a further £2 million from the Government and been refused. The timeline for criminal charges is slipping and, along with it, the hope for justice. As far as most local people are concerned, the police are one of the few trusted bodies, which is gratifying in an area where previously there was very little trust. I commend the police for their sensitivity in dealing with most of us, at least, in the past two years.

The campaign group Inquest recently published “No voice left unheard”—the results of a family consultation day for the bereaved and survivors when a large proportion of affected families were asked about their experience of being heard in the inquiry. It was pretty devastating. Many of them stated what I have witnessed—that they have had to fight for every single one of their rights: to be housed, to be compensated, to receive legal advice and mental health support and to understand what they are entitled to. Many of them feel that they have been punished for the failings of others.

On that note, I will hand over to my hon. Friends and other Members. I look forward to hearing their opinions and perspectives on these terrible matters that affect all of us across the country and worldwide.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. We have about 14 speakers and a couple of hours, so I hope that Members will limit their remarks and be careful in how long they take. If that does not work, then I will impose a time limit, but I hope, as this is a good-natured debate and everyone is aiming in the same direction, we should not need it.

12.8 pm

Paul Scully (Sutton and Cheam) (Con): I shall take your advice, Madam Deputy Speaker, and be as brief as I can.

I welcome this debate and congratulate the hon. Member for Kensington (Emma Dent Coad) on securing it on what is nearly the second anniversary of this terrible, terrible tragedy. If we look back to 14 June 2017, we will all remember waking up to those terrible pictures of the building on fire and the horrendous human tragedy that we saw unfolding in front of our very eyes, with the outpouring of grief and the solidarity that was shown in this place and, more importantly, in that community at the time.

The hon. Lady talked about the fact that there are a number of people still to be housed. I believe that the last figure mentioned by Lord Bourne in the other place was that about 196 out of 211 households had been rehoused, so that still leaves some to be rehoused. We need to look into exactly what expectations they have and what barriers are stopping those last few families getting into a property that they can call home; I hope the Minister will outline some of those in his summing up. It is important that people are not just pulled from pillar to post and moved around the area. They need to rebuild their roots. Their children will be at school and they will have local community roots, and they need to know that there is surety for them in that part of North Kensington.

I am glad to see that the Government have committed £80 million to a number of things over the past two years, including not only rehousing but mental health services. The hon. Lady talked about PTSD and mental health. It was one thing watching it on television, but if someone has lived through that—if they sat and watched it unfold in front of them, able to see and smell the flames and hear the sounds, which would undoubtedly have been terrible—that will stay with them. It is so important to look at the ongoing human costs, not only the bereavements. I am pleased that some money has gone into community spaces and support for the bereaved and survivors.

I was interested to read that the Bishop of Kensington has done a wider piece of work. I have not had time to go through all his conclusions, but the areas that he looked at, following conversations with survivors and people in the area, are really worth exploring. Those areas are wider than just the fire. He talks about renewing democracy, to ensure that people in those kinds of buildings and communities are listened to and that when there are warning signs and people are crying out for change, there are people—regardless of party politics—who are listening and, more importantly, responding.
Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way, and I commend the hon. Member for Kensington for her speech. She has been a stalwart MP for her constituents in this matter, and I congratulate her on that.

It is important that out of this terrible tragedy, with the lives that were lost and those that were changed, comes recommendations from the inquiry. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that it is important that lessons are learned and then shared with other parts of the United Kingdom? Across Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales, we all have areas in our constituencies where there are high-rise flats, and these changes need to happen everywhere else. Does he agree that the recommendations that come out of the inquiry and this debate need to be shared with the regional Administrations in Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales?

Paul Scully: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention, and I totally agree. It is disappointing that the report from the first part of the review has been delayed, but I hope that when it comes out in October, we will get some decent answers. I would rather it be slightly delayed, but with a decent set of answers that we can share across the UK, than rushed through to hit an arbitrary deadline. People want answers, and we want to be able to share those in all areas of the UK.

In July last year, a flat in a tower block in my area, Chaucer House, caught fire. Fortunately, there were many firemen, and I pay tribute to Sutton fire services, which I visited recently, and the neighbouring fire services. Because of the fear and worry following Grenfell, they were on top of it and controlled the fire very quickly. Some lessons have already been learned, but there are plenty more. Whether it is about the response of the fire services, the cladding or the building regulations, we need to learn these lessons to ensure that this can never happen again. Whether it is Lakanal House or other fires, how many times have we said in this place, “This must never happen again” and then similar things have happened again? We need a comprehensive response that we can all learn from.

The Bishop of Kensington talks about humanising welfare. It is a controversial issue in this place, but I would argue that universal credit seeks to do that, because it is tailoring benefits that were a blunt instrument. We always need to review these things, but in Sutton, which was a digital pilot area for universal credit, things have started to improve. Unfortunately, because of the political rhetoric about universal credit, there are people who are not claiming as much as they could, because they are still on the legacy programme. We need to smooth out the bureaucracy and technology as much as we can, to ensure that we have a humanised welfare system.

The Bishop of Kensington talks about becoming neighbours. When I led the e-petition debate last year, I read the names of the 72 victims of Grenfell into Hansard. I saw how Grenfell United and the other advocate organisations had mobilised so many people. The area had its own community, but that community has come so much closer together as a result. That is another lesson we need to learn. It should not take a tragedy to bring people together in communities. We talk about social isolation and loneliness. Many of the people in those flats knew each other and their stories. The more we have to do with our neighbours, the better, and if such a tragedy should occur or if there is a risk, we will find out about it by getting to know our neighbours better.

The bishop also talks about providing homes and noticing faiths. It was disappointing to hear the hon. Member for Kensington say that people had used the words “Islamic Caliphate” and other disparaging terms. We just had Eid al-Fitr on Tuesday, and I wish everyone celebrating that Eid Mubarak, John Cleese said on Twitter recently that London is not an English city. How do we define Englishness? It is a set of values, and it is a community. When I was doing my research for the e-petition debate, I looked at the stories of the 72 people who died. Many of them travelled across the world to make London their home. Some of them were fleeing persecution and conflict, and others were looking for a better life. I cannot use the word “community” enough. My friend Shaun Bailey, our London mayoral candidate, comes from that area. He was working in charities for young disadvantaged people in North Kensington, living under the shadow of Grenfell Tower himself.

It is clear that Grenfell Tower, with the white hoarding and the green heart on it, remains a symbol of community. You can see it from far away. I go down the westway on the A40 quite a lot, and the tower dominates the skyline. When you are walking past the posh houses in Holland Park, you only need to look down the road to see Grenfell Tower dominating the skyline. I hope that for as long as it is there, local people in Kensington, Chelsea and Westminster, which borders the area, reflect on what has happened there, to ensure that this never happens again.

I welcome the two new appointees to the panel, who I hope, with their experience, can add value to the findings. Perhaps the Minister could say a few words about the fact that some private leaseholders who have bought their properties may get caught out with the extra cost of re-cladding their buildings. Some developers have said that they will protect leaseholders from exorbitant fees, but we see from restoration of other buildings and blocks around the country how leaseholders can suddenly end up with a sky-high bill, and have to re-mortgage or sell their home. That is totally inappropriate, when these should be basic fire safety measures.

12.18 pm

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): I will speak in particular about the work of the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee. First, I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Kensington (Emma Dent Coad). I say in a heartfelt way that I do not think her constituents—particularly those most directly affected by this disaster—could have a better champion. She has the respect of Members across the House for what she has done to represent her constituents forcefully, with emotion and with detailed knowledge of these matters. She certainly has my respect for what she has done.

In looking at a disaster and a tragedy such as Grenfell, we can occasionally look at what can come out of it that will help others—in this case, what will help other people to be safer in their homes as a result. As a Committee, we have not looked at the causes of the disaster and the reasons for it, because that is a job for the inquiry to do. It was not our job to go into that area and second-guess its findings, but we have tried to
follow up particularly on the work of the Hackitt report. We have looked at what improvements can be made to regulations and rules on buildings and building safety to make other people safer in their homes and other buildings they are in in the future.

We produced a report last July after taking evidence. Prior to that, we had had a session with Dame Judith after both her interim report and her final report. We have had Ministers before us on a number of occasions. I see the Minister for Housing in his place. He came most recently in January, and he is coming again in a few weeks’ time. Dame Judith came in January, and she is coming again at a session before the Minister. We have tried to follow through not merely on what the promises were, but on how far they have been implemented and what more needs to be done. We have had a very detailed exchange of correspondence with Ministers.

Indeed, I am still waiting for some answers on the most recent questions we have asked. As I say, we tried to concentrate in our inquiry on the issues of cladding, building safety and building regulations.

In the end, this is a story of a response by the Government with a recognition that dangerous or potentially dangerous material on high-rise and high-risk buildings needs to be removed. However, it is also a story of probably quite a slow response in some respects, and of a response that is still completely inadequate in others and one that has not been finalised. I hope it has not been finalised because I hope that the Government will go further. It is a story about ACM cladding—the cladding on Grenfell—and clearly a requirement for that to be removed, and it is a story of other materials that may be just as dangerous as ACM cladding. It is a story of materials generally that are not of limited combustibility and what should happen to them. It is a story not merely of high-rise residential buildings, but of other high-risk buildings such as hospitals and old people’s homes. Very importantly, it is a story not merely about new building, but about existing buildings, and I will make particular reference to that in a few moments.

It was immediately agreed that the ACM cladding—the cladding on Grenfell—on other high-rise residential buildings should be removed. However, the Government initially produced no funding to go with that. It took till 16 May 2018—roughly a year after the disaster—for the Government to come forward with £400 million, which was welcome. It has generally meant quite a lot of progress on taking the cladding off high-rise social housing, and that progress is welcome. It is not quite complete, but it is welcome progress.

Alongside that, there has been a real problem in relation to private sector buildings and the refusal of the freeholders to accept responsibility. The Government’s reasoned response was that leaseholders should not have to pay for the responsibility. However, for a year after the announcement of the funding for social housing, there was virtually no progress at all on private high-rise buildings, except where some developers decided that they would accept responsibility for the material they had put on. We have to recognise that, in some cases, developers were no longer responsible for the buildings—they may have been bought out by other companies, which were often freehold companies with limited assets—while there were leaseholders who could not pay. It really was a situation that was never going to be resolved. Ministers kept saying—I think this was the famous phrase—“We rule nothing out”, but for the most part nothing actually got done for a long period of time. That was even though the Committee, when it did its report last July, recommended that an immediate fund be established, initially at a very low rate of interest, at least to provide the wherewithal to get this work done, and we could argue about who would pay for it afterwards. We are still very much in that position.

Jim Fitzpatrick (Poplar and Limehouse) (Lab): Does the Chairman of the Select Committee accept that there was not only a financial impact on the leaseholders exposed to this pressure, but an emotional one on their mental health from the anxiety of living in what they thought was not a safe home and of worrying about where they were going to find the money to pay for the remedial work and other fire costs?

Mr Betts: I entirely accept my hon. Friend’s point. I suppose I am trying to take a practical and financial approach to this issue. I recognise that that is all right for me sitting in here as a Member of Parliament, but for the people who actually live in these properties it is a very different experience, given the impact on their daily lives and their mental health, as my hon. Friend has rightly highlighted.

The Government then gave additional powers to local authorities. I am not sure that a single local authority has used any of those powers yet. Indeed, when the permanent secretary came to see the Committee, she said there was a risk to local authorities if they used the powers in relation to whether they could actually make them hold and make them effective, and whether local authorities could actually get any money back if they went in and spent the money themselves.

Now we at least have the £200 million fund that the Government have announced for private sector properties, but there are a lot of questions about it. First, who applies for the fund? Who ensures the work is carried out? Is there a timeline by which all this work has to be carried out? What happens if no one applies and the building is still there with this cladding on it? What happens to the local authority if it goes in and does the work in default: does it get the money back? What happens where a developer has already, rightly, paid for the remedial work and other fire costs?

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Mary Creagh: The Chairman of the Select Committee has proved very tenacious in following up on these issues. Does he agree with me that the Grenfell Tower fire was a systems failure—a whole-system failure—at various points, and that it is now imperative for the Government to put in whatever money is required to rebuild that system from the bottom up, so that in dealing with the consequences and the aftermath of that fire we do not recreate problems or create new ones in the systems for homes, inspections or fire regulations?
Mr Betts: I thank my hon. Friend for taking away from me my final, winding-up comments. She is absolutely right, and that is at the heart of Dame Judith’s report. This is about making sure that materials are right and are properly tested. In the end, it is not even about the building regulations in relation to fire; it is about the building industry as a whole and how it operates. There is a race to the bottom, and the industry is taking the cheapest on board all the time as the way forward. This is about making sure not merely that the materials are right, but that the materials specified are actually used, that the buildings are properly signed off and that they are properly maintained and managed. This is a whole-system issue.

Sandy Martin: Does my hon. Friend agree with me that the correct way of doing that is for local authorities, not private companies, to police the building regulations system?

Mr Betts: That is a really important point. In our report in July 2018, one of the things we highlighted was the conflict of interests in the building industry, which go right the way through. Fire authorities can actually be testing their own work and recommendations, which is wrong. This is also about the whole testing regime for products. We had evidence of producers going around different testing organisations until they found the one that actually approved their material, and there was no record of the failures from other organisations. Fundamentally, this is about building inspectors being appointed by developers and then signing off the work of the people that have appointed them. That cannot be right. This is not necessarily about local authority or private sector building inspectors, but about who appoints them to a particular job and whom they are accountable to, which is absolutely key. Dame Judith’s recommendations on that need to be followed through, because they are really an important part of the changes we need.

On other issues, when the Minister came to the Select Committee in January, we asked him about other forms of material. Rockwool had drawn to the Committee’s attention about 1,600 properties on which the material was not ACM, but could be as dangerous. The Minister was very open and direct about it, and he did say that all those properties would now be tested—I think there has been a delay in the testing, which is unfortunate, but it has started—but that if those tests showed that the material on those properties was as dangerous or as risky as ACM, the same rules would apply about taking it off and about having a requirement to take it off. That is what he said. There is, of course, disagreement about the testing arrangements, which have been a matter of contention right the way through our work. We must come to a conclusion whereby the industry in general is satisfied that the tests are fit for purpose, but nevertheless that testing is happening, and if any material is as dangerous as ACM, it must be removed. Will the Government pay for that as well as for taking ACM off homes in both the social and private sectors? That is a fundamental question. There is no point in banning the stuff if we then return to the same problems that we had with ACM.

The Government introduced a ban on materials that are not of limited combustibility immediately after Dame Judith’s report—on reflection she probably feels that she might have recommended that herself, and she

is certainly comfortable with that recommendation, which was right. But there is a problem—the elephant in the room—how can we possibly say that it is too risky to put materials that are not of limited combustibility on new buildings, if we are happy for such materials to remain on existing buildings? How can we say to people, “You are safe in your homes, but we wouldn’t put that material on a new home because we don’t think it’s safe”? That is a fundamental problem.

I am sure that sums are going round in the heads of people in the Treasury, who will be counting the cost of taking material that is not of limited combustibility off all existing buildings. That cost will be considerable and probably far larger than the budget for dealing with ACM to which the Government had to commit, but is the Minister really comfortable with saying to people, “You’re going to live in a home that has material on it that we would not consider safe to put on a new building”?

I know that if building regulations are changed, we cannot always go back and retrospectively apply them to all existing buildings, but we are talking about a fundamental issue of safety and fire prevention that the Government must consider. Importantly, we must also think about non-residential buildings. Many hospitals, schools, student accommodations and residential homes are not covered by the current ban, although they are high-risk buildings. In 2018 the Committee said that this is about not just high-rise but high-risk buildings, and that provision must be applied.

Some progress has been made on many issues, but we have a lot more to do. Dame Judith recommended a whole review of building regulations, which is key, and we must get proper tests agreed. There is the conflict of interest to resolve, and the issue of existing buildings. Fundamentally, however, as my hon. Friend the Member for Wakefield (Mary Creagh) prompted me to say, this is about the whole construction industry not being fit for purpose. We need a fundamental review of how it operates, considering not just specifications, but including the management of projects and ensuring that people have homes and other buildings that are safe to live in.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. I am happy to have given some latitude to the Chair of the Select Committee, which is perfectly reasonable, but we must now introduce a time limit of seven minutes.

12.33 pm

Sir David Amess (Southend West) (Con): Grenfell should not have happened and it is a stain on this place that it did, but my words will be of no comfort to the victims and relatives of those left behind. I think I was sitting in the Chair where you are now, Madam Deputy Speaker, when I listened to the maiden speech by the hon. Member for Kensington (Emma Dent Coad). She has spent two years of her time here fighting tirelessly on behalf of her constituents. Those who report on these matters are fixated with Brexit and with who is or is not visiting our country, but in eight days it will be the second anniversary of the nightmare, and I pay tribute to the ways that the hon. Lady has ensured that Grenfell is not forgotten in this place. She has become vice-chair of the all-party parliamentary fire safety rescue group. A number of other colleagues in the Chamber also bring their expertise to that group, whether that is a
former fire Minister who leads on fire safety in leasehold properties, a colleague with expertise in white goods, or another who brings with him 31 years of service in the fire brigade. It is probably the best all-party group with which I am involved.

The world was horrified when we saw a tower block ablaze in the fourth or fifth wealthiest country in the world, and it should never, never, have happened. Over the past six years, the all-party group has met resistance when seeking improvements to fire safety, despite compelling evidence that such measures should be introduced. In the 13 years since regulations were last reviewed, nothing has happened. It is perhaps rather easier for a Conservative Member to make those points than it would be for other Members, because we should never have got to the position of the Grenfell Tower fire tragedy, especially after the warnings and recommendations from the coroner after the Lakanal House fire and the 2013 inquest, the rule 43 letter to the Secretary of State—I am glad to see the Home Secretary in his place—the large number of letters exchanged between me and numerous Ministers, and meetings with successive Ministers.

It brings no comfort to the victims of Grenfell if we blame. It is the fault of the Conservative Government, the coalition Government, the Labour Government—it is the fault of every Member of Parliament that our voice was not heard and the recommendations were not listened to. Speaking at the Local Government Association fire safety conference on 4 July, the Minister for Policing and the Fire Service said that

"we may have to confront an awkward truth...that over many years and perhaps against the backdrop of, as data shows, a reduced risk in terms of fire, in terms of number of incidents and deaths, that maybe as a system some complacency has crept in."

The questions to which we need an answer are: has enough been done? What has changed? What difference has been made? The official answer is that immediately after the fire, the Government announced a public inquiry under Sir Martin Moore-Bick. They appointed Dame Judith Hackitt to undertake an independent review of building regulations. They established an independent expert panel, chaired by Sir Ken Knight, and set up a comprehensive website at the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government that lists all actions then taken and proposed. It is therefore not true to say that nothing has been done, but not enough has been done. The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government, and the Home Office, would retain overall joint responsibility for the measures to be taken, and as the hon. Member for Kensington said, it is for others to talk about how the housing situation has been dealt with.

Whether enough has been done during these two years depends on what perspective we take. The Government have established a public inquiry, an independent panel of experts, and a building regulations review. There have been calls for evidence, working groups, and Committees have been pointed in a direction of travel, with instructions to those who were guilty of a “race to the bottom” to fix things. There are Departments full of people and a website stacked with volumes of literature and guidance, but there is little by way of prescriptive action and that is the frustration of the all-party group.

To his credit, the Secretary of State has banned combustible materials from high-risk buildings over 18 metres and desktop studies, and he has extended the removal of dangerous materials on private sector flats. But why not all high-risk buildings, not just those over 18 metres? Why are we still building single staircase high-rise flats? This is crazy! Why are we still building new schools without making it mandatory for them to contain sprinklers? It is six years since the Lakanal House fire and disaster, and the coroner’s letter to the former Secretary of State has still not been properly acted on. The classic example is the encouragement for retrofitting sprinklers in all tall flats, which was recommended by the coroner after the Lakanal House fire.

The Minister for Housing (Kit Malthouse): The Chair of the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee and my hon. Friend have raised this issue, and so that the House is fully informed, it is worth pointing out that this morning we laid a written ministerial statement with our response to the Hackitt report and our proposals for consultation, including calls for evidence. One of those proposals is about the scope of buildings that should be looked at as part of the Hackitt inquiry. I understand my hon. Friend’s desire for urgency, but we have today published a statement and launched a large exercise to gather evidence, consult on proposals, and put in place some of the measures that have been mentioned.

Sir David Amess: I apologise to my hon. Friend and the Home Secretary. I was not aware that that action had been taken and I have not had time to look at it. I will read it with great interest and hopefully it will be of some encouragement to our group.

The formal review of building regulations promised by the Secretary of State in 2013, to be completed by 2016-17, still has not started. They were last looked at in 2006 and it will take at least a year and a half before anything comes from it.

In conclusion, the building regulations must be reviewed. We have to stop messing about. We want a proper audit, so there is retrospective fitting of sprinklers in all high-rise buildings. We need urgent action on all these matters. There are a number of Scottish and Welsh Members here. Wales and Scotland are further ahead than England in regulating for automatic fire sprinklers and the built environment. I ask my hon. Friend the Minister: why is England so far behind, given that it is coming up to two years since Grenfell and 10 years since Lakanal? The hon. Member for Kensington is doing a splendid job, but I really hope it is not necessary to have another debate in a year’s time and to be again frustrated by a lack of action.

12.41 pm

Ms Karen Buck (Westminster North) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Kensington (Emma Dent Coad) on securing the debate and on the work she has championed since she was elected. She was plunged into this catastrophe just days after being elected—probably one of the biggest challenges any Member of Parliament has had to face. She knows how much it matters to me, too. My previous constituency boundary included Grenfell Tower. As the neighbouring constituency, many residents in my constituency watched in horror from tower blocks around Harrow Road as the fire claimed those lives. The trauma affects my constituents, too.
The night that Grenfell burned and 72 people died in a modern, refurbished tower block, at the heart of one of the wealthiest communities in one of the most prosperous cities in the world has ever known, is seared into our national consciousness. It is a defining moment of modern British politics. It should have been the event that changed everything. It should have brought about a wholly new attitude to housing, social housing and meeting housing need, the duty of care we have to people in high-rise accommodation, risk and deregulation in housing. I let myself believe that that would be true. It should have been a defining moment and it has not been.

Of course, some action has been taken, as my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts), the Chair of the Select Committee, said: the inquiry is under way; we have had the interim report from the Hackitt review; and the Government have today launched a consultation. I am grateful for the fact that the Government backed my private Member’s Bill, the Homes (Fitness for Human Habitation) Act 2018, which allows tenants legal recourse when their homes, including the common parts of flats, are unfit and threaten their health and safety. That includes fire risk. We have also had the £200 million fund for cladding removal in private blocks.

What has not happened, however, is a seismic shift in attitude and action from the Government. That falls into two parts and I will briefly refer to both of them.

The first is the meeting of housing need relating specifically to Grenfell. On the day after the fire, we convened in Westminster Hall—Parliament was still prorogued; it was just after the election—and a number of us spoke to Ministers about the aftermath. I recall saying to Ministers that one of the things that needed to be understood was how many of the residents in Grenfell Tower and around Grenfell had direct or close experience of homelessness, and how critically important it was that immediate action was taken to provide permanent accommodation for them. In addition to the trauma of the fire, the dislocation of moving from one home to another and the experience of being in emergency or temporary accommodation would only compound what they had experienced. I remember placing that in the context of rising homelessness across London and the importance of not making other vulnerable families in housing need wait longer for a home because of the demands posed by Grenfell. Heads nodded.

We know now, two years later, that not all those housing needs have been met. Of the 202 households from Grenfell, 14 remain in temporary accommodation. Of the 129 evacuated from the wider area, 41 are still in temporary accommodation. That is unacceptable. It sits in the wider context of homelessness across London, which is detailed, as my hon. Friend the Member for Kensington said, by the Shelter commission. That should also have been a wake-up call and a demand for immediate action to tackle housing need.

We have seen very little action. There has been a collapse in social housebuilding under this Government. It was inadequate beforehand—I am happy to say that—but there has been a collapse since then, with record lows in housing delivery and an acute homelessness crisis. The needs of the Kensington and Grenfell families should be seen in that context. In a new era for social housing that Grenfell should have generated, we have not seen action from the Government.

The second legacy, as we have heard, is the Government’s commitment that such a catastrophe should never happen again and that people should not fear that it will happen again. They should not live under the shadow of safety concerns in their own blocks, yet two years on that is exactly where we are. We know that 60,000 people live today in blocks with potentially dangerous cladding. We know that eight out of 10 of the blocks that had cladding have yet to have it removed. We know that 16,400 private apartments are wrapped in potentially dangerous cladding. In a question to the Mayor of London two weeks ago, Assembly Member Andrew Dismore found that London Fire Brigade paid 1,200 visits to high-rise premises with suspected flammable cladding, of which 316 confirmed flammable cladding. That is at its most acute in three boroughs: Tower Hamlets, where there are 65; Greenwich, where there are 45; and my own borough of Westminster, where there are 26.

The £200 million the Government recently announced is welcome—it came just under the wire for the second anniversary—but it is clearly not enough to ensure that either the ACM cladding blocks or those in potentially non-ACM flammable cladding can be dealt with.

We have heard from the Select Committee about the generally deregulatory attitude of the building industry. It was very, very concerning to see a survey in Building, which showed how little the business industry had risen to the challenge of safety concerns and how little change there has been in the way it works.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): My hon. Friend is absolutely right that the industry has not taken responsibility. It is a shame that past Ministers are on record as putting the onus on industry, saying it is not for the Government to regulate but for the industry to self-regulate. Does she agree that we have to end that, and that if industry will not take responsibility the Government will have to act?

Ms Buck: I totally agree. People living in high-rise blocks wrapped in cladding find it inexplicable that the Government still have such a deregulatory approach and expect the industry to take responsibility.

Mary Creagh: Does my hon. Friend share my concerns about the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy’s review of fire retardants in foam on the back of fridges and in furnishings, cots and mattresses? This issue has been ongoing since 2004, following warnings from officials that the flame retardants were no longer fit for purpose and could, paradoxically, cause more injury through smoke inhalation than they prevent through stopping fire. Three years after the 2016 consultation, the Government still have not published the responses.

Ms Buck: It is completely inexplicable. The public expect the Government to act quickly and firmly to ensure that products and building standards are safe, but that has not been done. As the Building survey showed, nearly half those operating in the industry had not been swayed by the Hackitt report’s recommendations to change the way they shared building safety information with their supply chains; nearly a third reported no change in product specification and performance checks;
and more than a third reported no change in checking on the quality of work being undertaken. We have an industry that is effectively in crisis in meeting safety standards. As we approach the second anniversary, it is time that the Government recognise that the deregulatory approach does not work.

We heard a great deal in the early days after the fire about retrofitting sprinklers, but in my constituency, where the local authority—to its credit—was prepared to make that investment, that has faltered, as it has in many other places, because the Government have yet to get to grips with the reality of mixed tenure in high-rise properties and the fact that it is impossible, under the current law, for local authorities to require the owners of private flats in local authority blocks to give them access and comply with the requirement to fit sprinklers. As a result, everybody else in those blocks is potentially suffering.

We are, two years later, in an unsatisfactory position. We have failed to rise to the challenge of Grenfell and this distracted, exhausted and fractured Government have not done enough to honour the memories of the dead and support the survivors—nowhere near.

2.51 pm

Bill Grant (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (Con): It is a privilege to follow the hon. Member for Westminster North (Ms Buck).

I congratulate the hon. Member for Kensington (Emma Dent Coad) on securing the debate and commend her for the tenacity and dignity she has shown over the past two years, which must have been an immensely difficult journey. I thank her for that.

This is an intensely emotional subject, and I am aware that some in the House have strong views on what the royal borough or the Government might, or should, have done differently in their immediate response to the aftermath of what we all know as “Grenfell”. Likewise, the former residents, who have all been through the most traumatic event—some having lost family and all having lost their home—have every right to expect clarity going forward. I hope that this debate will go some way towards providing a bit of clarity, because it has been lacking to date.

There have been well-publicised cases of families still waiting to be offered permanent accommodation, seemingly for reasons that are not swiftly resolved. Given the magnitude of the tragedy, I suspect that the response was reasonable in the circumstances and accepting the constraints of a single London borough, particularly considering that those working within Royal Borough of Kensington would have been just as devastated—and probably more devastated—as the rest of us in the UK when we first learned of the tragedy that summer morning, as the facts unfolded. This includes people working in the housing department, in adult social care and in family and children’s services, as well as local councillors and, not least of all, the MP, all of whom have liaised with the residents of Grenfell Tower over the two-year period and will have been deeply affected by the fire and its aftermath and consequences.

Whatever some of us might feel or think about the response, we must commend those workers for their efforts in the most extreme and distressing circumstances. They worked tirelessly and efficiently to find temporary accommodation and support, and they should be proud of their efforts. I note, however, that there have been failures in that journey—not by all, but by some—and the failures that I have heard about in the Chamber today are totally unacceptable. A number of emotional support schemes were set up to assist former residents of the tower after the fire, but I hope that those working within the borough have also had all the support necessary to help with their emotional wellbeing in dealing with the aftermath of the tragedy and the personal contact that they had with individuals.

Former residents have rightly and reasonably expressed concerns about the speed at which the Grenfell Tower inquiry is progressing, or, as might be the case, not progressing. They are understandably keen for closure to an extremely traumatic episode in their lives—an episode that someone can only imagine unless they experienced it themselves. It must be borne in mind that by all accounts there is a remarkable weight of written evidence and verbal testimony, and giving that testimony would have been a challenge for those individuals. That is all to be worked through and properly considered and the response will take time. Nevertheless, will the Minister update the House on the progress of the inquiry? I am sure that it would bring some comfort to the residents to know that progress is hopefully being made on the journey towards securing the truth and justice that they so richly deserve.

There are few adjectives sufficient to describe the bravery of the fire officers and other emergency responders on the night of the Grenfell fire—and a very dark night it was in London. We owe those individuals a great debt and I thank them. I am aware that the review of the fitting of sprinklers is ongoing. It is a natural move from the effectiveness of the home smoke detector. It is a natural move for the system where we live to have sprinklers, irrespective of the cost, which should not come into it. It will be only a small fraction of the new-build cost of a house, and retrofitting can be achieved. In my time in the fire service, as a fire officer of 31 years’ standing, I have seen the effectiveness of sprinklers. They work—that is not in any doubt.

The key issue is cladding, and how the fire spread so rapidly is of particular interest to me. Pending the release of the inquiry report, I would be grateful to know from the Minister what progress has been made in remediating social, public and private buildings with regard to the high-risk cladding that is attached as we speak. There are unsafe homes in the United Kingdom. We need to speed up addressing, resolving and mitigating or removing that risk—mitigating is an option, but the final thing is to remove the risk entirely. I know that there has been difficulty in persuading the owners of some private dwellings to do the right thing for their leaseholders and tenants. An update on that matter would be most welcome from the Minister.

For those who have been through an ordeal such as this, there is seldom enough that can be done to restore personal confidence or relieve long-term anxiety. I am hopeful, however, that with the right support and with post-inquiry progress on building and construction standards, we will—and must—do everything possible to ensure that this tragedy can never be repeated, as I have said before. That thought, I hope, will bring a little comfort to those who survived this tragedy. I am fearful
that they and others will remain troubled and traumatised for years to come. The loss of 72 innocent lives at Grenfell must focus the minds of legislators. Their loss must not be in vain.

12.57 pm

**Mr Steve Reed** (Croydon North) (Lab/Co-op): I add my congratulations to those given to my hon. Friend the Member for Kensington (Emma Dent Coad) for her phenomenal leadership on this issue. She represents a constituency where many people feel disenfranchised and voiceless. In this place, she has become their voice and we thank her very much for that.

Days after Grenfell Tower went up in flames and 72 lives were lost, the Prime Minister promised to do everything in her power to keep people safe. That was two years ago and the Government’s record since then has been one of denial, dither and delay, as they failed to act on words that now ring very hollow indeed. Some years before Grenfell, in 2009, there was a fire at Lakanal House in south London that led to the death of six people, including a baby. The inquest reported in 2013 with very clear recommendations. The coroner said that the fire safety regulations and, specifically, part B of the building regulations that cover fire safety, were unclear. That was why unsafe and combustible cladding was being strapped on residential buildings inappropriately. The coroner warned, sadly prophetically, that if the confusion was not put right, more deaths would follow.

The Government were given that warning in 2013, but they did nothing, so three years later, flammable ACM cladding was strapped to the outside of Grenfell Tower. A year after that, it went up in flames and 72 people lost their lives. It could not be more horrific, and I am afraid that Ministers’ responsibility could not be clearer. We are now two years further on and yet the fire safety regulations remain unaltered. The Government could have acted on those regulations after Lakanal House 10 years ago, but they did not. They could have introduced a complete ban on flammable cladding after Grenfell, but they did not. They could have taken immediate action to strip Grenfell-style flammable cladding from every housing block where it existed, but they did not. Why not? Because if they had belatedly acted on the Lakanal House recommendations after the deaths at Grenfell Tower, they would have had to accept that their failure to act earlier had contributed directly to that disaster. Rather than do that, they chose to cover up their earlier inaction with more inaction. If the leaders of a private company had acted in the way that Ministers did, they would find themselves in the dock charged with corporate manslaughter. Ministers should reflect on that.

Last December the Government finally, and belatedly, announced a partial ban on flammable cladding, but a partial ban is not enough. They have proposed a ban on flammable cladding on new buildings over six storeys or 18 metres high, but have excluded hotels and office blocks. I simply cannot understand why. I have written to the Minister asking for the evidence that a hotel or an office block is safer than a block of flats, but he has not provided anything convincing, and I doubt whether he will be able to. Surely people in a hotel where they have never stayed before are less likely to know the fire safety escape routes than they would be at home, in a block of flats with which they are familiar; and if flammable cladding is not safe above six storeys, why would anyone on the fifth or the fourth floor want flammable cladding strapped outside their home?

The Government propose to continue to permit the use of flammable cladding on the majority of schools, care homes and hospitals, because most of them are under 18 metres high. How do the Government think parents will feel, knowing that flammable cladding is still allowed on the outside walls of the school that their child attends every day? No parent I know would tolerate that.

Right now, there are still 60,000 people living in 272 blocks with Grenfell-style cladding. The Government refused all demands to act for nearly two years. They finally performed a welcome U-turn last month and found £200 million to remove and replace flammable ACM cladding on residential blocks, but even that is not enough to pay for the work to be carried out fully. It includes nothing to deal with other types of flammable cladding which could be just as dangerous as ACM, nothing to deal with failing fire safety doors, and nothing to enable sprinklers to be installed in the blocks where they are required. Even after all this time—even after two years—Ministers continue to evade their responsibility to keep people safe.

The best way in which to meet the Lakanal House coroner’s demand for clarity on fire safety rules is to introduce a complete ban on flammable cladding on all buildings where people live or work, and that ban should not only cover new buildings. We must take down flammable cladding wherever it exists, because it is an unacceptable danger to people’s lives. Many European countries have already introduced a complete ban; Scotland is introducing one, and we need one here in England as well.

**Rushanara Ali** (Bethnal Green and Bow) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that it is completely insane for the Government not to introduce a complete ban? If they are not going to do so, Ministers should guarantee today that there will be no further fatalities. Otherwise they should call for a complete ban, through legislation if necessary.

**Mr Reed:** I completely agree with my hon. Friend. It strikes me as incredibly and frighteningly contradictory to say that flammable cladding cannot be allowed on new buildings, but is fine on buildings where it already exists. If I lived in a block like that, I would be living in fear, and I know that thousands of people are living in those circumstances.

There is still an average of one fire a month in buildings with flammable cladding, and it is only a matter of time before one of those fires is not put out. Let us mark the anniversary of the Grenfell Tower disaster next week, and honour the memory of those who died by making sure that what happened at Grenfell can never happen anywhere ever again.

1.4 pm

**Rushanara Ali** (Bethnal Green and Bow) (Lab): I thank the Backbench Business Committee for securing this important debate. Like others who have spoken, I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Kensington (Emma Dent Coad) for her powerful speech, and for all the work that she has been doing to support her community
and, in particular, the victims of the Grenfell fire. I also wish to commemorate the 72 people who needlessly lost their lives, and all those who were injured and traumatised by that terrible fire. The grieving and suffering, the trauma and anguish, have not diminished since that dreadful night, and our thoughts remain with those who are having to live the nightmare again and again—an experience that is worsened by the fact that the Government have still failed to tackle the underlying problems that are leaving people at risk.

Like Hillsborough, the Grenfell Tower fire was an avoidable man-made disaster. It is a story of warnings ignored and official neglect: the stuff of nightmares, which could have been prevented. Shockingly, it has emerged since the disaster that ACM cladding, and similar flammable cladding, are present on hundreds of buildings across the country. Many blocks in my constituency have ACM cladding. In the immediate aftermath of the Grenfell fire, Ministers promised swift action to replace such cladding, but, as we have already heard, that action has not featured the urgency that is so desperately required.

Members on both sides of the House, as well as many campaign groups including Grenfell United, had to fight tooth and nail to secure £400 million for the removal of ACM cladding from social housing blocks. More recently, after much campaigning by, for instance, “Inside Housing” and Members here—especially Opposition Members—the Government finally, grudgingly, agreed to provide £200 million to remove dangerous ACM cladding from private blocks. I am grateful to them for that, but people should not have had to wait a year for the social housing funding and two years for the funding for private blocks—and it is still not enough, because 1,700 high-rise blocks in the UK have non-ACM cladding that is also dangerous.

The Government need to act. We should not have to keep coming back and begging Ministers to address this appalling failure. They should be using their own initiative. If the risk of further deaths is not scary enough for them, what is? How will they be able to live with themselves if the Grenfell fatalities are repeated in the future? I know that they do not wish that to happen, but we need to see cross-Government work to ensure that the necessary resources are available, and we need to see legislation to back up the work that is so urgently required for all buildings that are at risk.

As we heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Croydon North (Mr Reed), after Grenfell the Government banned the use of combustible cladding on some high-rise buildings measuring more than 18 metres, but that does not go far enough, because people will remain unsafe in cladded buildings less than 18 metres high. A ban that is limited to hospitals, student accommodation and care homes is also not enough. The ban must be comprehensive, applying to any block with ACM cladding or other forms of dangerous material that needs to be removed.

Dangerous cladding is a risk on all buildings, irrespective of their height or purpose. A fire does not discriminate between buildings of different use: it does not discriminate between residents in accommodation and an office block, or between a private homeowner and a social housing tenant. It is not acceptable that the Government continue to permit the use of combustible materials of any kind on our buildings, for reasons that Ministers have already heard. It is a dereliction of duty to carry on like this. It is vital for Ministers to take the situation seriously and act, rather than constantly having to face pressure to do so.

As others have pointed out, the Prime Minister said:

“My Government will do whatever it takes to... keep our people safe.”

The Government have done nothing of the sort. They have taken some action, but it is frankly not acceptable. The Minister is raising an eyebrow; he should try living in one of those blocks, perhaps for a few nights, and see what it feels like. He should experience the insecurity and anguish that families have to live through, with their children, fearing that their homes might burn down and there might be further fatalities. That is why this is so important; that is why action is needed.

The regulatory system has failed to protect our residents. In 2016 I raised in the House concerns about the inability of residents to complain to the local government ombudsman about major disrepair issues which could lead to further fatalities. Grenfell tenants raised some of those issues. They complained about problems they were facing and risks long before the fire. That is well documented in programmes including the “Panorama” documentary. One of the major issues for residents is that under the Localism Act 2011 they have to wait a few weeks and then contact a Member of Parliament to submit their complaints to the ombudsman. Those things delay attention being paid to major issues, particularly around the safety of the blocks people live in.

The Government could improve the regulation to ensure residents have a strong voice. They could ensure that there is better accountability and transparency about the kind of blocks people live in and the kind of safety issues those blocks face, so that people can hold the management of those buildings—whether freeholders, registered social landlords or arm’s length bodies—to account. We must never allow fatalities like those at Grenfell to happen again, and that is why the Government must act quickly.

1.11 pm

Grahame Morris (Easington) (Lab): I am very pleased to be able to speak in this important debate and declare an interest as a member and co-chair of the Fire Brigades Union parliamentary group. Like other Members I pay tribute to my good and hon. Friend the Member for Kensington (Emma Dent Coad) for her work and congratulate her on securing this debate and on her remarkable personal courage in the work she has done in the wake of the Grenfell tragedy. I think every Member has acknowledged that and is touched by her commitment to the issue. I want to pay respect too to the victims of Grenfell—those who lost their lives and all who were touched by the terrible tragedy—and acknowledge the contribution of the fire and rescue services in their valuable and valiant work on the day and subsequently.

I know we want to go forward together in a positive fashion with some positive ideas about how we can ensure that this never happens again, but I want to touch on a couple of points. I was surprised that in her resignation speech the Prime Minister referred to Grenfell as part her positive legacy, because in my humble opinion that shows a complete lack of self-awareness and suggests
that everything has been resolved and the issues have been addressed when, frankly, they have not. As we approach the second anniversary of Grenfell, it is an absolute scandal that no one has been held accountable for the deaths of 72 innocent people.

A flawed inquiry with narrow terms of reference is proceeding at a glacial pace. The inquiry was expected to produce a phase 1 report and urgent recommendations to the Prime Minister by this spring, but the Minister has just told us from the Dispatch Box that this has now been delayed until October, and that the second phase of the inquiry, due to commence this year, is now being delayed until 2020. The public inquiry, rather than securing answers, is delaying justice. The Metropolitan police warn that there will be no changes arising from its criminal investigation until at least 2021 as they wait for the inquiry to publish its findings.

In my opinion, the inquiry’s decision to focus phase 1 on the night of the fire provided a reprieve to the companies and public bodies for their decisions. These things do not happen by chance; they are the consequence of decisions, often political decisions, and this has given those companies and bodies an opportunity to shift the blame and emphasis as to who should be held to account.

From reading Dame Judith Hackitt’s report it is plain to me that our fire safety regime is simply not fit for purpose when it allows—and continues to allow, as we have heard from a number of Members—people to live in buildings that can burn at the speed and ferocity we saw at Grenfell. The decline in fire safety and building standards is such that a leaked report by the Building Research Establishment found that had Grenfell Tower been built today under modern, less stringent safety standards, it is likely that the building would have collapsed either fully or partially as a result of the fire. That shows how far regulation has regressed by not improving standards but allowing them to fall.

The magnitude of what happened at Grenfell, which should have been a wake-up call or watershed moment, seems to have passed Ministers by. After decades of deregulation, the scrapping of professional standards and the fragmentation of fire and rescue services, we need nothing short of a complete overhaul of our fire safety regime. We need to reverse a decade of austerity and under-resourcing that has led to the loss of one in five firefighter posts and one in four fire safety officers since 2010. Interestingly, one message to come out of this is that it is vital that we understand that fire safety officers are critical in preventing fires. The Government need to commit to the ban and removal of all combustible cladding on buildings, irrespective of height, and deliver safe homes for all.

We need a national review of the “stay put” policy when compartmentation fails. I say this without any disrespect to firefighters, as I hold them in the very highest regard. They are trained according to national guidance on the “stay put” policy and they train according to set procedures, but this is about managing risk and the uncertainties of firefighting. When confronted, as they were on that night, with a most appalling blaze they were put in an impossible position, in extreme conditions that would be beyond the comprehension of most of us. All their training focused on the “stay put” policy, and I will quote from an article by Tony Sullivan, a retired London firefighter with 31 years of experience in the service. He wrote that “the “stay put” policy is the only thing that can work routinely in a residential high-rise building, and here is why.

The building is designed to contain fire in each individual flat and for the stairways especially to remain clear of smoke and heat. This is why it is vital all doors are fire doors and closed in the event of fire...If everyone were to evacuate around the same time, opening doors...would immediately compromise the fire safety of the building...This could create a chimney effect, spreading fire, and result in loss of life...When a “stay put” policy begins to be compromised, we can’t immediately advise people to leave their flats and enter several floors of several hundred degrees centigrade.

If you know crews in full fire gear and breathing apparatus are struggling to get through several floors of heat and smoke, how will residents get down?”

So perhaps we need a review of the policy if compartmentation fails and a situation such as that at Grenfell arises. But what we certainly need is a complete overhaul of building regulations and fire safety.

1.18 pm

Karen Lee (Lincoln) (Lab): I too congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Kensington (Emma Dent Coad) on securing today’s debate and commend her for her hard work over the past two years on behalf of her constituents.

It is a shame that we are here today. This debate should not be happening or should at least be happening on better terms. Two years ago on 14 June 72 people died and the Grenfell community still do not have justice. It is simply outrageous that nearly two years on from the disaster we have the outgoing Prime Minister referencing the Government’s response to Grenfell as a proud element of her legacy. This is the same Prime Minister who has failed to deliver her far-reaching promises such as rehousing survivors within three weeks and ensuring a similar disaster could never happen again. The Prime Minister did not even meet the community, the people she is supposed to represent, to show solidarity in their time of need.

It is therefore unsurprising that, two years down the line, the Prime Minister’s initial display of apathy has been sustained through the Government’s overarching indifferent approach to an issue that required urgency. There are still 128 households that have not been rehomed, and the area surrounding the tower is still contaminated with toxic chemicals. The community were, and still are, vulnerable, and they need the state’s help. Instead, they have been woefully let down.

The threat of another disaster like Grenfell has not been addressed. Grenfell was not the first catastrophic tower block fire to be caused by the failure of fire regulations, and lessons should have been learned from the fires at Harrow Court, Lakanal House and Shirley Towers, but they were not, and due to action since Grenfell being restricted to weak tinkering, many communities are still living in constant fear. The Government know that there are 338 residential buildings wrapped in the same combustible aluminium composite material—ACM—cladding that was used on Grenfell Tower, but they have not identified all the buildings at risk and there are potentially hundreds, if not thousands, of ticking time bombs across the UK.

The restrictive building safety programme has displayed no urgency to identify all the current threats, and I hope that the Secretary of State can explain to the House why the Government have restricted the search to buildings
with ACM cladding and are only just beginning to search for high-pressure laminate cladding when there are countless other types of combustible cladding. The scope of the search must be expanded to all combustible cladding below Euro class A1. I understand that the Government are constrained by financial considerations, but public safety must be the prevailing priority, and it is important that we understand the total risk.

Combustible cladding is not the only threat. It is important that we understand how building compartmentation is failing and multiplying the risk of fire by combustible materials interacting with one another. There needs to be a mechanism for holistic assessments that include all the materials installed on a building. As a result of years of cutting red tape and deregulation, the current state of fire safety has created this dangerous mess, and I urge the Government to acknowledge the threat caused by deregulation and to conduct a review of what is necessary to ensure effective compartmentation.

Meanwhile, it is firefighters who are expected to respond to the increased risk, but although the threat remains, the fire and rescue services' capacity to respond has been progressively degraded over the past nine years of austerity and each firefighter’s workload has increased dramatically. As research by the Fire Brigades Union has shown, fire services across the UK are not sufficiently prepared for a disaster on the scale of Grenfell. The Home Office has suggested that fire services are prepared, even though it did not contact the services directly before making that claim. The Government do not grasp the severity of the threat, and research shows that regional inequalities represent a difference between 40 fire engines attending a disaster like Grenfell and only two attending.

I hope that Government Departments realise they are not doing enough, and that they will take considerable action to safeguard vulnerable communities and support the Grenfell survivors. Simply banning combustible materials but not seeking out the full scale of the threat is not good enough, and neither is failing to recognise that a review of the fire and rescue service is desperately needed after nine years of destructive austerity. The threat is still very real and the emergency services cannot keep the public safe on a shoestring budget. The time for talking is over. We know that people are suffering and that the same threats remain, so it is time for the Government to take this seriously and to act. All of us in this House represent communities across the country, and I believe that we come into politics for sincere and positive reasons, but we must surely understand that what has happened in the past two years with regard to Grenfell is just not good enough. It is long past the time for warm words; it is time for positive action to rehome those people and to deal with the future threats. Let's just get on with it. No more words; let's see some positive action, please.

1.23 pm

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): The horrific image of Grenfell is still very fresh in all our minds, almost as if it happened yesterday. I am sure that is true for every Member here, but it is particularly true for those of us who represent neighbouring constituencies. In many ways, the community across north Kensington, north Westminster, White City and Shepherd’s Bush is one community, and people there feel this very deeply. I would like to add my thanks and praise to my hon. Friend the Member for Kensington (Emma Dent Coad), who has had the difficult and traumatic job of trying to represent that community. She has done that brilliantly over the past two years, and indeed for many years before that. I would also like to thank the shadow Housing Minister, my right hon. Friend the Member for Wentworth and Dearne (John Healey), who has doggedly pursued this issue and tried to ensure that there is action on the subject.

The truth is that Grenfell did not happen yesterday. It happened two years ago and, as we have heard from many Members today on both sides, there has been dragging of feet. Let me say a few words about the concerns being expressed about the inquiry. There are concerns about the order of issues and the fact that the inquiry has not even got on to looking at the building material, among other aspects, and will not do so until next year. The tone of the inquiry has also raised concern. We have other major inquiries, such as the contaminated blood inquiry, going on at the moment, which might have got that better. There is also the issue of cost. I have heard—I do not know whether this is absolutely right; I ask the Minister confirm or deny it—that the police costs for the Grenfell inquiry are not being covered by the Government and that up to £30 million may be coming out of the Metropolitan police budgets. If that is true, it is a disgrace that adds insult to injury.

Kit Malthouse: I am happy to provide some clarity. As I understand it, on costs, the Metropolitan police service was awarded £11.4 million in 2018-19, of which it has spent £5.9 million. The expected costs in 2019-20 will be around £6 million, which will be provided from the special grant budget. So there is no intention that there should be any shortfall on investigatory costs.

Andy Slaughter: I am grateful to the Minister for intervening, but I would like to feel absolutely certain on that. I would be grateful if he could write to me to guarantee that any additional costs for the police will be covered from central funds and not from their own budget.

The key point I want to make on the inquiry relates to its longevity. The fact that it will take time means that it is being used as an excuse. We are not short of good advice from people at the Royal Institute of British Architects, the Fire Brigades Union and the London fire brigade about what needs to be done now, but actually things are not being done now. An example is the fact that a consultation has just been published in the middle of this debate. In fact, I was tipped off by the fire brigade about five minutes before the debate started that there was a 200-page document to be read. Why could that document not have been published yesterday, or even the day before, to inform the debate? The terrible suspicion is that this has been done in order to capture a headline, so that, rather than the Government’s inaction on this subject being highlighted, they appear to be doing something.

I had a chance to read the written statement and the Government’s press release, which contained the welcome comment that “too many in the building industry were taking short cuts that could endanger residents in the very place they were supposed to feel safest—their own home.”
I could not agree more, but who is responsible for this? Within the last five years, Ministers have said in relation to the important issue of sprinklers:

“We believe that it is the responsibility of the fire industry, rather than the Government, to market fire sprinkler systems effectively and to encourage their wider installation.”—[Official Report, 6 February 2014; Vol. 755, c. 188WH.]

The right hon. Member for Great Yarmouth (Brandon Lewis) has stated:

“The industry itself has an opportunity to make a case. I am not convinced at the moment it is for the Government to make a case for private industry.”

That is typical of the Government. The right hon. Gentleman said that when he was the Housing and Planning Minister, but I am sure I could have quoted many others. We have to get rid of this ideology, and the Government have to face up to their responsibility on this matter.

In the short time I have, I will cover a number of topics, although necessarily very briefly. Individual Grenfell survivors are not being well served. I am not going to name her for reasons of privacy, but I have a constituent who escaped with her daughter from a high floor in Grenfell Tower on the night. She then spent a year in hotel accommodation and a year in temporary accommodation in my constituency. She appears to be no nearer to getting rehoused. I may pass that case to the Minister, because he may want to intervene himself, because this clearly is not working. It is not working generally for survivors. I would like to see an open book approach to how the rehousing has been dealt with. It happens that Kensington and Chelsea was the richest council in the country; I wonder what would have happened in Northamptonshire or somewhere of that kind. To some extent, the Government have been let off the hook there. We still hear reports that people are not in permanent or suitable housing, or that housing has been purchased but is in such a state that it still needs to be got ready. People have gone into permanent housing because they felt pressurised to do so and have then had to come out of it because it turned out to be unsuitable. That is entirely unfair.

Issues of causation have not been addressed, such as that of the fridge-freezer—the plastic back is still legal, despite the fact that it is prone to fire—the fridge-freezer, manufactured by the Whirlpool company, who have a terrible reputation for white goods of this kind. We will not find out until the end of this year exactly what the Government and the appliance industry have said. We will not find out until the end of this year exactly what the cause of the fire was. Everyone suspects that the cladding was the major form of spread, but we are no further forward in knowing the exact sequence of events in relation to that. On all the other fire safety issues around regulation, means of escape, fire doors, and building security—fire alarms and matters of that kind—we are really as in the dark now as we were two years ago.

There were issues around what happened on the night, and the fact that clearly—not just Kensington and Chelsea, although they were utterly negligent to the extent that they could not even accept offers of help from other authorities, but generally speaking—we were not in a state to deal with a major emergency of this kind. If it happened again tomorrow, would we be any better off? I would like to know the answer.

I am grateful that the Chair of the Select Committee and others have dealt with some of the complex issues of fire safety; I do not have time to do so. I am glad to hear from the chair of the all-party group that they are pursuing this matter as well. To have dealt with ACM cladding only, and not with high-pressure laminate cladding—which can be twice as combustible as ACM cladding—over the last two years is negligent. Not to have heeded the advice of the fire brigade and others in relation to sprinkler systems is negligent. Not to have looked at the testing processes, and the combination of materials—not just cladding but insulation, and how they work in situ, not just in test circumstances—is equally negligent. I am afraid there is still a terrible stench of complacency from the Government, even after two years.

Mr Reed: My hon. Friend is making some important points about the inadequacy of what the Government are proposing, but in the written ministerial statement that they have issued—during the debate rather than before it—they are proposing not to consult on whether 18 metres or six storeys is the appropriate height, and therefore they are not even going to consider whether a ban on flammable cladding below that height should be looked at. Does he think that is acceptable?

Andy Slaughter: It is absolutely not acceptable, and my hon. Friend has made some points in his excellent speech about the lacunae—all the missed opportunities to deal with existing buildings, including other types of high-risk and high buildings, which are not even within the Government’s purview here, despite many experts having pointed out the necessity of that.

Let me say a few words about housing. In the decades following the second world war, we were building an average of about 125,000 social homes a year. In the past year, we built 6,000. I would like to know what will happen on the site of Grenfell. The sooner the building goes, the better. Yes, we can have a consultation on what should be on the spot. It is a sensitive matter. Why are we not specifically replacing the hundreds—it is not just the tower itself—of social homes that have been wrecked by the fire?

The year before the Grenfell fire there was a serious fire in Shepherd’s Court, a tower block in Shepherd’s Bush, in my constituency, and the fire spread; so I am only too aware just how traumatic fire can be for residents. Thankfully, there were no injuries. But incidents like that should have been warning signals; they were not heeded. Grenfell is a nightmare. I can think of no worse way to die—waiting for rescue, hoping for hours that it was going to come, and then the slow realisation that it was not going to, and that you were going to have the most horrific death. If that is not a wake-up call to this Government, I do not know what is. I would like to see much, much more action to ensure that this never happens again.

1.33 pm

Jim Fitzpatrick (Poplar and Limehouse) (Lab): I appreciate the opportunity to make a brief contribution to this very important debate. I commend my hon. Friend the Member for Kensington (Emma Dent Coad) for securing it, and for the role that she has played over the past two years as Member of Parliament for the constituency containing the Grenfell Tower. I am very pleased to follow my hon. Friend. The Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter), a fellow officer of the all-party parliamentary fire rescue group.
I will not refer to the housing, rehousing and social issues because they were ably covered by my hon. Friend the Member for Kensington and others much closer to the events than I. I want to focus on the response in terms of the fire aspects. I thank the London fire brigade, the Mayor of London, the Business Sprinkler Alliance, the Fire Brigades Union and the Local Government Association for their briefings and continued interest and continued pressing of Government on this issue—and, of course, the Library for its papers for the debate.

All those bodies agree, I believe, that there was not, and was never going to be, a quick fix. There were and are some things that the Government could do, some of which they have done, and others that they should be doing, but I suspect that until the public inquiry concludes, the full story will not be out, and I am sure that even then there will be disagreements about the inquiry’s conclusions and recommendations. There have been some interim actions from the Government via the Hackitt review and pressures from elsewhere, but as Dame Judith Hann, who pronounced, we need a comprehensive and cultural change, including the revision of fire guidance and regulations, and the updating of building design, construction, inspection and approval.

Fire protection through suppression systems like fire sprinklers has become a main focus for many, and that is the one area where the Government ought not to await the conclusion of the public inquiry. There is a consensus across the fire sector that the protection offered, the lives that can be saved, the reductions in systems costs and the understanding of what can be achieved ought to persuade Government to do more on this, and to do it sooner rather than later. That includes for new and refurbished schools. That is one area that the all-party group has been focusing on since the coalition Government reversed the Labour Government’s 2008 guidance to local authorities, which had stated that schools should be fitted with fire sprinkler systems. That reversal has cut the number of schools being protected by fire sprinklers by over half in the past six years.

The all-party parliamentary group, chaired so ably by the hon. Member for Southend West (Sir David Amess), has been pressing on that, and for a revision of Approved Document B, for some years. Government should act now. I was very pleased to read the written ministerial statement issued this morning—a little bit late, but at least it is out. It has some very important elements, especially on the first page in respect of a comprehensive duty holder regime, and the list on page 2 of the things that the Government have done so far, which at least demonstrates that they have been doing something. I acknowledge that another consultation will be necessary, but a brief one—to the end of July—so hopefully, given how much work has been done, and ought to have been done, by the Department so far, conclusions will be quickly reached at the end of the consultation and we can see further progress in respect of protection for people in their homes.

On removal and replacement of defective cladding, the Government moved to support the social sector more quickly than they did the private sector. It took a year—it was two years for the private sector—but at least there is £600 million out there and most council and housing association properties have been addressed, or are completed, or at least the process is under way. The much slower response of the private sector obviously meant that similar progress was not possible there. But to his credit, the Secretary of State’s decision to come forward with the £200 million, and to instruct the Department and give a directive that that money should be made available, is very welcome. As my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts), the Chair of the Select Committee, said, any more information in respect of application for and circulation of the £200 million will be extremely useful, because there is still great concern about who can apply, how to apply, when the money will be available and who can get it.

There emerged from evidence sessions at the public inquiry some very unhappy and unfair criticisms of individuals, particularly of London fire brigade personnel, who unfortunately, in terms of timing, were among the early witnesses before the inquiry. As we all know, the media are merciless when they have anyone in their crosshairs as a target. No one is individually to blame for Grenfell. Some will be more guilty than others, some more culpable than others, but that will only come out through the public inquiry in due course. This was a comprehensive and catastrophic failure of oversight, from local government architects, engineers, construction, building control, inspectors, fire authorities, fire brigades and, no doubt, others. Apportioning responsibility is important, and I am sure it will happen. What is more important, what is critical and what is life and death, however, is to make sure that we construct and maintain safe buildings for people to live in. We are not there yet, and we will not be there for some time, but the responsibility for progress lies with the Government. They have to recognise what needs to be done—I know they have recognised that to a degree—what can be done and how to do it before the public inquiry concludes. The House’s impatience is clear from today’s debate. The Government need to recognise that and move on with this as quickly as possible.

1.40 pm

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): I thank all hon. Members who have contributed to this debate. Few of us here will ever forget the awful scenes of summer 2017. I pay tribute to all the families who lost loved ones and to the beautiful community spirit of all the residents who have campaigned tirelessly for justice. I thank Grenfell United and all who have provided support and solidarity. We saw earlier this month the community iftar commemorating those who were lost two years ago.

The organisation and activism in this community has been exemplary, but let us be clear that they should never have had to be activists. They should not have had to fight for justice—the hon. Member for Bethnal Green and Bow (Rushanara Ali) outlined some of that fight—and they should be living their lives, playing with their kids and spending time with family and friends in safe and appropriate housing.

I thank the hon. Member for Kensington (Emma Dent Coad) for securing this debate and for her personal commitment to this cause. It touched my heart to hear of all she has been through and of all she has done on behalf of her constituents. I am sure she would agree that we do not want to have another debate six months down the line, although I acknowledge her desire to see this through, whatever it takes.
There have been too many debates already, and too little action. Speaking to Katherine Sladden from Grenfell United, it is clear to me that survivors need more than another debate; they need clear and decisive action from this UK Government. It is shocking to hear that they are still waiting to be rehoused in the area.

In her resignation speech the Prime Minister cited the UK Government’s response in calling an inquiry into Grenfell as the hon. Member for Lincoln (Karen Lee) and for Easington (Graham McMorris) mentioned, as if this was some kind of achievement. I am afraid that history will not judge the Prime Minister kindly on this. Indeed, even the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government has told the House that the Government’s initial response to the Grenfell tragedy was not good enough, and it is beset by delays even now.

It is equally disappointing that the timescale for the public inquiry has slipped and that phase 2 will not now begin until next year and, further, that Scotland Yard has stated that there will be no criminal charges until 2021. I appreciate that there are complexities, but there is a desperate need for justice. The Grenfell fire was a tragedy, but that does not mean it was unavoidable. The people of Grenfell were systematically failed, and a catalogue of errors led to the fire. They tried time and again to raise their concerns about fire risk and other issues, and it should not have taken this fire to get notice taken of those concerns.

The Grenfell residents are not alone, and we know there are still too many people living in high rises with ACM cladding and other issues. They are living with no certainty and a great deal of anxiety about their safety. That is unacceptable, and I ask the Minister for an update on the progress on all building types.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): Does my hon. Friend agree that Grenfell United, the Grenfell community and their wonderful MP, the hon. Member for Kensington (Emma Dent Coad), are fighting for basic human rights? The Edinburgh Trade Union Council and Living Rent are jointly organising a demonstration next week to show their support for the Grenfell community, to pay homage to those who died and to show support for the ongoing fight. Does my hon. Friend agree that it is appropriate for all rights campaigners and trade unionists across the UK to stand with the people of Grenfell?

Alison Thewliss: I absolutely agree, and I thank my hon. and learned Friend for what she says. The solidarity across the UK and across the world has been moving. Again, it is a fight that should not have to be fought. The right to safe housing should not be a fight that we are still fighting in 2019.

The Equality and Human Rights Commission’s report on Grenfell makes for difficult reading, and it says: that the housing was inadequate to begin with; that the right to life of particular groups, such as disabled people, elderly people and children, was not properly considered; that safety notices were published only in English, a language that some people in the tower did not speak; and that, after the fire, people who had suffered inhumane and degrading treatment were continually let down when trying to access support and basic services.

There has been a lack of investment in social rented housing and a lack of value placed on the lives of those who live in such housing. Grenfell United’s briefing says that residents feel short-changed by Kensington and Chelsea Council, with corners cut and concerns ignored. What it calls a “culture of institutional indifference” is chilling, but not as chilling as what the hon. Member for Kensington outlined about the racism and the comments made by people in that institution.

It struck me at the time that some representatives of Kensington and Chelsea Council had never been inside Grenfell. It quickly emerged that other tower blocks in London had no fire doors or safety procedures, and had been like that for some time. I have been inside every block of flats in my constituency, not least because they are great places to leaflet in the rain—it rains a lot in Glasgow—and I cannot imagine going in and finding no fire doors or finding them in such condition. Most have an on-site concierge who wants to know why a visitor wants to get into the building, and there is maintenance.

In the past, some blocks that, thankfully, have now been demolished were not great but, as a councillor at the time, I had a relationship with housing officers so I could challenge such things. I listened to constituents’ concerns, as I still do, and I acted on those concerns. I find it hard to understand this fundamental disconnect, and I hope it is not too late to mend that disconnect between those who live in such blocks and those who represent them.

I urge Ministers to consider the calls from Grenfell United for an independent tenant protection regulator that can put power back into the hands of tenants to ensure that they have full recourse to means of resolving complaints and bringing all properties up to a safe standard. The Scottish Housing Regulator was established in 2011 under the Housing (Scotland) Act 2010, and its statutory objective is to “safeguard and promote the interests of current and future tenants of social landlords, people who are or may become homeless, and people who use housing services provided by registered social landlords (RSLs) and local authorities.”

That is a means of recourse.

I urge the Minister to look at the Scottish model, which includes a process for reporting significant performance failures. That is defined as “something your landlord does or fails to do, which puts the interests of the tenants at risk. This does, or could, affect all your landlord’s tenants.”

Such a system would certainly have caught the concerns of Grenfell residents and prompted an investigation.

What is most disturbing, however, is the Government’s approach to fire safety. It has been nearly two years since the events at Grenfell and, as the hon. Member for Croydon North (Mr Reed) reminded us, nearly 10 years since Lakanal House. The response in England has lagged behind the response in the other nations of the UK. The National Fire Chiefs Council and the Royal Institute of British Architects have called for fire safety regulations in England to be brought in line with those in Scotland and Wales, particularly in requiring sprinklers and a second means of escape.

The Scottish Parliament set up a ministerial working group in the wake of the Grenfell fire, and legislation will be introduced this year to fulfil those recommendations, which include extending the mandatory installation of
sprinklers in new builds to cover buildings that provide care and to larger multi-occupancy flats. A change in building standards will reduce the height of high rises from 18 metres to 11 metres—I note that the UK Government are still talking about 18 metres, but 11 metres is much better because 18 metres is very high—and will extend the range of new buildings that require non-combustible cladding.

New measures have also been proposed to improve evacuation by using sound alerts and requiring two escape stairs in all new high-rise residential buildings. That will go alongside the development of a database of safety-critical information for existing high-rise residential buildings. The Scottish Government will also issue fire-safety risk assessment guidance to the residents of high rises, the lack of which was a contributing factor at Grenfell.

For private companies, a positive step from the UK Government would be to zero-rate cladding and sprinkler systems. I have repeatedly called for that, as has the Scottish Government’s Minister for housing, Kevin Stewart MSP. It is in the Government’s gift to incentivise private companies to act responsibly and to relieve some of the burden of costs, and I sincerely hope they will take that small step.

Some private developers have taken a responsible route and met the costs, but there is still no statutory obligation on them to do so. I call on the Minister to make a move in that direction. As the hon. Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts) and others have said, the Minister must also provide revenue funding for ongoing building maintenance—not just for the one-off capital works—because that will keep people safe for years to come.

I also urge the Minister to look at more advanced testing across various materials, as the hon. Gentleman also said, and to consider the wider context. It has been suggested to me by some in the industry that materials may pass the tests when taken out of context, but they act in quite a different manner once in situ and installed on a building, as the hon. Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter) mentioned. This requires serious investment and testing, with discussions with all involved in building design and manufacture, and I urge the Minister to take that on board.

The impact on those who endured trauma at Grenfell will continue for some time, and I appreciate that a wellbeing service has been set up to last five years, but we must not assume that this will be the end of the need of some residents or that they will all access such support when it is first offered. The support needs to be there for the long run. I ask the Minister for further consideration of what the needs of residents will be in future years, and an assurance of how those will be met. I also note that although the soil testing that the Minister announced last October has shown low risk, people are still anxious. He must be mindful that some harms, due to the chemicals involved, may take longer to emerge, and I ask him what the plan will be to ensure that everybody is looked after in the years ahead. As the hon. Member for Kensington mentioned, the mental health and social needs of the whole community must also be taken into account; the definition must be as wide as possible.

I also understand that there has been a period in which rent and bills have been frozen for some residents who were displaced and rehomed, but that it is due to come to an end relatively soon. I ask the Minister to give more detail on what is going to happen, because I am concerned that for those who have lost everything, a sudden hike, with no gradual transition, could leave some residents struggling. Although I believe sessions have been arranged with Citizens Advice, as much assistance as possible should be offered by the whole of government to those residents who require it.

Grenfell was a tragedy. It was scandalous. It was avoidable. It was symptomatic of a wider problem with this UK Government’s attitude to social rented housing and to the people and communities who live there. But this is not irredeemable. The residents of Grenfell want to ensure that nobody else will lose their life or the life of a loved one in such an awful way. They will always remember the 72 who died, but they want to create lasting change in their memory. I call on the UK Government and the Minister to honour the survivors and the lost by taking action, and to do it now.

1.51 pm

John Healey (Wentworth and Dearne) (Lab): Today in this debate and over the next week, above all else we remember the 72 men, women and children who lost their lives that night in the terrible Grenfell Tower fire. We recognise the continued suffering of the survivors and bereaved families. We rededicate ourselves to seeing the survivors get the homes and other help they need; to bringing all those culpable to justice; and to putting in place every measure needed to make sure we can with confidence say that Grenfell can never happen again.

May I therefore congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Kensington (Emma Dent Coad) not only on securing today’s important Back-Bench debate but on the extraordinary way in which she has fought for her community over the past two years? She has done so again today, setting out the way in which the trauma and problems of that night continue for the survivors and for the community of north Kensington. Let us also pay tribute to that community—to the churches, faith groups, advice centres and residents associations—for their compassion and commitment to each other, not just in the immediate aftermath of the fire but in the two years since. We especially pay tribute to the Grenfell survivors and families, who, like Grenfell United, have turned their grief into their fight for justice and for wider change.

It is precisely the wider policy, procurement and political decisions of those in power that the residents and the communities affected by this tragedy want us to tackle. This was not a natural disaster; it was man-made.

The hon. Member for Southend West (Sir David Amess) said:

“Grenfell should not have happened and it is a stain on this place that it did”.

May I add to that by saying that all of us in this House have a deep responsibility to make sure that it never happens again? Members on both sides in this debate caught the human side of the tragedy and of the aftermath.

My hon. Friends the Members for Westminster North (Ms Buck) and for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter), both of whom have constituents who were caught and lived in the tower did so, as did the hon. Member for
Sutton and Cheam (Paul Scully), although I have to say that he lost Opposition Members when he started lauding the merits of universal credit as a humanised welfare system.

A series of powerful points made by Members on both sides of the House require action and answers from the Government, and we look to the Minister to provide them. The Chair of the extremely important Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts), rightly said that the real problem concerns private block owners, where he said almost no progress has been made. He asked a series of important questions about the new £200 million fund for block owners and freeholders, which of course is not yet open for business. The hon. Member for Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock (Bill Grant), whom I was interested to hear spoke as an ex-fire officer, said that sprinklers should become a “natural” thing in all our high-risk buildings. I say to him that it is not a lack of clarity that has led to the fact that they are not, but a lack of will and commitment from the Government to make sure that that happened.

My hon. Friend the Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick), who also has experience as a serving fire officer, made the same strong argument about the value of fire sprinkler systems.

My hon. Friend the Member for Croydon North (Mr Reed) asked why hotels have been excluded from the Government’s new ban on incombustible cladding and why action has been so slow on testing non-ACM cladding. That was echoed by my hon. Friend the Member for Hammersmith, who rightly described the failure to do this systematically as negligent. He also called for an open-book approach to get to the root of what the problems really are in rehousing the Grenfell survivors.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bethnal Green and Bow (Rushanara Ali) talked about the need for residents to have the right to complain about problems in their building and, in particular, about safety concerns—the hon. Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss) picked up on that.

My hon. Friend the Member for Easington (Grahame Morris), speaking with the backing of the Fire Brigades Union, rightly reminded the House of the vital role and bravery of firefighters. He made the important point about the impact of the past nine years of austerity, the cut in the number of frontline firefighters and the loss of one in four fire safety officers.

My hon. Friend the Member for Lincoln (Karen Lee) also cited FBU research, which concludes that at present our fire services are now unprepared for and potentially unable to tackle a fire on a similar scale—that really should worry the Minister.

We do not underestimate the Government’s challenge in responding to Grenfell. Some progress has certainly been made over these long two years, which we welcome and for which Ministers, including the current Secretary of State, deserve credit. There has been some Government procurement of new housing for survivors, and there is now a ban on combustible materials for new high-rise homes and funding for the cladding remediation on existing blocks. However, a national disaster on the scale of Grenfell Tower requires a national response from the Government—that has not happened. Ministers have been like rabbits in the headlights. For two years, the action they have taken has been too slow and too weak on every front. My hon. Friend the Member for Westminster North rightly set out for the House the background to this fire: the collapse in social house building, and rapidly rising homelessness. This wider context of the night, after seven years of a Conservative Government, is important, because it helps to explain why action from Ministers has fallen so far short.

Since 2010, Ministers have abolished the tenants’ regulator for social housing and National Tenant Voice; they funded just 1,000 new social homes in the year of the fire, when they also became the first Government since the second world war to stop all national funding to help build new social housing; and they have pursued a regulation policy of “one in, two out”, with the then housing Minister saying after the coroner’s report on the Lakanal House fire that on fire safety measures such as sprinklers it was “not…for the Government to make a case for private industry around what they should be doing.”

When the far-reaching changes that are demanded in this country by the Grenfell tragedy must mean tougher safety regulations, stronger enforcement powers for councils, clearer legal duties for private block owners, and greater rights for tenants and for leaseholders, it is clear that the fundamental problem lies not in slow administrative decision making or in the lack of compassion from individual Ministers; it lies in the basic beliefs of the Conservative party in government about hands-off government, light-touch regulation and private sector market solutions.

So let me set out for the Minister where the Government are still failing and must do more, and I hope that he will be able to respond to these points.

First, there has been a failure to rehouse the survivors. Two years on, one in 12 of the families from the tower are still living in emergency or temporary accommodation, even though Ministers promised that every victim of the fire would be rehoused in a new home within one year. Will the Minister now give the House and those families his cast-iron assurance that every survivor will be in a permanent home by the two-year anniversary at the end of next week?

Secondly, there has been a failure to give the Grenfell community justice. Two years on, the public inquiry is moving too slow and its remit is too narrow. The first phase was due to report at Easter 2018, but it has still not been published. Will the Minister now confirm when it will report, when the crucial second phase of the inquiry will start, and when the inquiry will finish?

Thirdly, there has been a failure to re-clad blocks that have been confirmed to have the same dangerous Grenfell-style ACM cladding. Two years on, eight in 10—that is 272—of those high-rise blocks that are known to be clad in the same dangerous material have not had it removed and replaced. Seventy private block owners do not even have in place a plan to do the work. Will the Minister set a deadline by which all blocks that are known to have this dangerous cladding will be made safe?

Fourthly, there has been a failure to identify unsafe non-ACM cladding. Two years on, tests on hundreds of blocks with other types of potentially dangerous cladding are still not done, despite the Government’s testing contract having set a deadline for the work to have been completed by November 2018. Will the Minister now
confirm, for thousands of high-rise residents, when he will publish the results, and that the tests will be comprehensive pass/fail tests and will cover all, not just some, types of non-ACM cladding?

Finally, there has been a failure to overhaul the building safety system, as many Members mentioned. The Hackitt review published its final report in May 2018, yet two years on the legislation is still not in place. Following the publication today of the post-Hackitt consultation paper, will the Minister now tell us when he will publish the legislation itself and when the Government will take the steps needed to keep buildings safe? Most importantly, when will the Government retrofit sprinklers in all social housing blocks, as Labour, the fire chiefs and the chairman of the all-party group on fire safety, the hon. Member for Southend West, have all long argued?

The Government have been too slow to grasp the depth and breadth of the problems that they need to fix, and then too slow to act. A few weeks after that terrible fire in June 2017, a leading housing chief executive said to me, “Grenfell changes everything.” It should have done, but it has not. I desperately want this to be the last anniversary of that terrible fire when the basic duties of Government are unfulfilled and when the necessary fundamental changes to our system are incomplete. Until then, as my hon. Friend the Member for Kensington said, we will return to this issue again. We will continue to press, with the Grenfell community, for justice and for the far-reaching changes that can guarantee that a tragedy like Grenfell can never happen again in our country.

2.3 pm

The Minister for Housing (Kit Malthouse): I commend the hon. Member for Kensington (Emma Dent Coad) for securing this important debate at a time when, as the right hon. Member for Wentworth and Dearne (John Healey) pointed out, we are all reflecting on the terrible tragedy of Grenfell Tower and remembering the 72 people who tragically died at that time. Since I took up this role last year, doing right by the victims and survivors of the Grenfell Tower has been central to my work as Housing Minister. It has also been part of a personal mission, not least because the tower stands in what was my London Assembly constituency, with which I obviously have a personal connection. I recognise the strength of feeling on this issue from Members from all parties, and I am grateful for all their contributions. A number of complex questions have been raised, and I will attempt to address most of them in my remarks, but we will respond in writing to each Member whose questions are not covered.

I am quite happy to be held to account for our work on this issue. As the right hon. Member for Wentworth and Dearne said, Grenfell does change everything, and I have made commitments, in private and in public, on the need for fundamental change as a fitting legacy to those who died. I am held to account in meetings with Grenfell United and with individual residents, and by the Select Committee, and I have been held to account by the House on a number of occasions. It is quite right that I am, because we need fundamental and swift change.

Questions from Members have fallen broadly into four areas, which I shall address specifically. First, several Members expressed concerns about the speed of the rehousing and resettlement of the bereaved survivors. The right hon. Member for Wentworth and Dearne wishes to hold me to a guarantee on rehousing; I hope he appreciates that such are the complexities of the circumstances of some of the individuals concerned and of rehousing, that our ability to move swiftly for them is reliant on their own circumstances, wishes and desires. I have taken specific interest in individual cases, particularly those in emergency accommodation in hotels and serviced apartments, and reviewed them regularly with the council to satisfy myself that not only are those people being catered for but that we are being sensitive to their particular state and their own desires and requirements.

The fact remains that for the 201 households that needed rehousing, the council acquired more than 300 homes in and around the borough. Of those 201 households, I am pleased that they have all accepted offers of permanent or temporary homes, with 184 households now living in their new permanent accommodation and 14 households in good-quality temporary homes. We have had cases in which those in temporary accommodation have sought to have that accommodation converted into their permanent homes. I do, though, share Members’ concerns about the three households that remain in emergency accommodation, including the one household that remains in a hotel. As I said, it is essential that people move on only when the time is right for them. To make sure that an independent eye is kept on those particular circumstances, I requested that the independent Grenfell recovery taskforce continues to keep us apprised of the evolving situation and looks specifically at those three cases to satisfy itself that the council’s actions are proportionate and that those individuals are catered for appropriately.

It is fair to point out that it would be a mistake to think that people who are in emergency accommodation in a hotel or serviced apartment have been there throughout the whole two years. Such have been the circumstances of individuals and the trauma and difficulties that they have been coping with that some individuals have moved in and out of temporary accommodation. As I said, I hope that Members appreciate the complexity of the situation with which we are dealing. We are working in partnership with the community, the council and local health partners, and we remain determined to ensure that all the families who are recovering from this tragedy have the long-term support that they need to move on with their lives.

The hon. Member for Kensington raised the issue of the residents on the walkways. I remind her that all those residents were awarded an extra 900 points to push their priority upwards. Nevertheless, I recognise the situation they are in.

The second area of questions raised by several Members was on the environmental and health impacts. Public Health England has been monitoring air quality in the area since 2017. We have not taken the community’s concerns lightly and have carried out extensive testing to assess whether there is any ongoing risk to health. We will take all appropriate action to ensure that no risk is posed to residents. Of course, Professor Stec now serves on the Government’s scientific advisory group, to make
ensure that we all work together to find some kind of resolution or, indeed, to reassure the community that they have nothing to fear.

The NHS has stepped up health services and checks for the local community, committing more than £50 million over the next five years, including for increased trauma screening, fast-track referrals and long-term follow-up, if required. I thank the NHS for all its incredible work to support the long-term physical and mental health needs of the Grenfell community.

The third area that has been raised is, quite rightly, the speed of remediation. I can understand the anxiety, fear and insecurity that many people feel on this issue, not least because I have met, on a number of occasions, people who live in these buildings and representatives of the UK Cladding Action Group. In the time since the fire, this Government have acted with the utmost urgency to address the most serious fire and public safety risks that the tragedy so ruthlessly exposed. With the support of local authorities and fire and rescue services, we identified a total of 433 high-rise residential buildings, hotels, hospitals and schools with unsafe ACM cladding. These buildings were assessed by fire and rescue services, and interim safety measures were put in place.

We have amended the law explicitly to ban combustible materials from use in the exterior walls of all high-rise residential buildings, but I recognise that residents across the country will truly have peace of mind only when unsafe cladding has been removed and replaced with safe materials. We have made £400 million available to pay for the remediation of ACM cladding for those buildings owned by local authorities and housing associations, and that work is almost complete, with 87% of buildings done. We have allocated £259 million of that £400 million to 140 buildings. We do not anticipate that there will be any further claims, but if there are, they will be honoured. We gave owners of buildings in the private sector enough time to step up and meet their responsibilities, and many did, but I regret that some did not. Last month, the Government acted decisively, providing a fund to unblock progress and ensure that remediation takes place on all buildings that need it. That fund stands at £200 million. We estimate that 153 blocks will be eligible. I was quite rightly pressed about detailed criteria, and we will be issuing the application process and what those criteria will be as soon as possible. There was a question from a Member whom I cannot recall about whether buildings that have already been remediated in the sector could seek to recover costs.

John Healey: It was my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts), the Chair of the Select Committee.

Kit Malthouse: Yes, indeed, and that is the case.

Although I understand the concerns about the speed of the remediation, I hope that Members will be aware that this work requires significant amounts of engineering and construction work, which will necessarily take time. On numbers, at the end of April, of the 175 residential buildings, 15%, or 27, have finished or started their remediation, and a further 116, or 66%, have plans in place. I have asked the Department to report to me as soon as possible on what a timetable might look like to ensure that we can reach completion of that programme within a reasonable length of time. I hope that Members will appreciate that, while there is a requirement or a desire to press me for an end point, it is more complicated than just fixing a date and time, because there are obviously capacity issues. There are planning and engineering issues that need to be taken into account, but I would like to get to that place in pretty short order. The money has only just been provided, and what I would like to get to in pretty short order is a sense of what the industry is capable of achieving and some benchmarks for performance that we can hold it to.

A number of Members also asked about the testing regime for other materials and that work is now under way. We hope that that will be completed before the summer, and that we can publish the results shortly thereafter. As I have said in previous debates in this House, we have a commitment and a strong imperative to investigate the materials that are being used in these circumstances in a systematic and methodical way. Although there is a range of cladding products, they are used in a range of circumstances and in combination with a range of other materials. That matrix of possibilities creates many dozens of combinations that will need to be assessed over time. We have to start with the cladding itself, and, as I have said, that testing is under way at the Building Research Establishment, and we should be able to publish results soon.

The fourth area of work is obviously the building safety programme itself. After the tragedy at Grenfell, it became obvious that things had to change around building safety and change very significantly. The Government responded quickly with the Hackitt review, and it has given us an important root and branch look at building safety. We have been vociferous in calling for a culture change across the industry and backed it with serious action. We have consulted on a clarified version of Approved Document B and issued a call for evidence as the first step towards a technical review. As part of that review—a number of Members raised the issue of sprinklers—we obviously can review the requirement for sprinklers in buildings.

We have also established an industry early adopters group made up of key players in the construction and housing sector who have just this morning launched a new building safety charter calling for all of industry to commit to putting safety first.

Andy Slaughter: Will the Minister also tell us what the Government will do about the “stay put” policy? According to Inside Housing and the FBU briefing for this debate, 209 residential buildings in London alone have changed from “stay put” to evacuation, which has all sorts of implications for guidance, alarm systems and so forth. What are the Government doing to make sure that these matters are addressed and are clear to everyone?

Kit Malthouse: As I am sure the hon. Gentleman understands, fire safety policy does not fall within my remit and is effectively a Home Office issue. I did recently meet representatives of the fire service, who said that this policy is under constant review but remains valid. However, I am happy to write to him with details of what the Government are doing with regard to “stay put”. I understand the concern that that policy has produced in the light of the Grenfell disaster and it is important that we are transparent about it. As I have said, I am more than happy to write to him with some details.
[Kit Malthouse]

On building safety, we are determined to bring forward meaningful legislative reform. Just today, we launched a consultation on the new building safety regulatory system. The written ministerial statement was not actually laid, as the hon. Member for Croydon North (Mr Reed) said during the debate. It was raised at 10.30. I asked Doorkeepers to distribute it if they could, and it is now available for Members to read if they wish. In that review, we have accepted all 53 of Dame Judith Hackitt’s recommendations and in some areas we intend to go further. What we are proposing is a radically new building and fire safety system—a system that puts residents’ safety at its very heart. It will be a challenging but essential step to help drive the long-term culture change that we need and restore confidence in our country’s building safety system.

Mr Betts: I thank the Minister for giving way. I had not seen the details of the statement until I spoke earlier in the debate, but I welcome the Government laying it. I know that the Minister has made arrangements for me to speak to me later about it and to come to the Select Committee where I am sure we can ask further questions. May I just draw his attention to one interesting phrase where he says that we have proposed that the new regime should apply from the beginning to all new and existing multi-occupied residential buildings? Does that mean that the Government are having a careful think about whether the ban on materials not of limited combustibility should apply to existing buildings as well as new buildings? It says that the regime will apply to all buildings, including existing buildings.

Kit Malthouse: I am grateful to the Chair of the Select Committee for raising this issue. The hon. Member for Croydon North also implied that we were not willing to look at other buildings retrospectively or indeed at buildings below 18 metres, or at hospital or schools or whatever it might be. What we are trying to do is fix a starting point, but then design a system that allows for flexibility in response to evidence and research in the future. One lesson is that, obviously, as building technology develops and new issues emerge, the system must have the ability to respond. That is what we are seeking to do in the consultation. Certainly, we are open to representations as part of the consultation about whether the scope should be widened. I hope that the Committee will respond.

Mr Betts: Was that a yes? I was trying to work out whether the Minister would be willing to look again at this matter.

Kit Malthouse: The issue of retrospection is obviously a difficult one from a regulatory point of view. One of the things that we have said is that all building owners have a duty to ensure that the buildings that they own are safe. If that means that they have to take remedial action retrospectively to comply, to make it safe, then they should do so. The question of liability, as the hon. Gentleman knows, is also a difficult one. Nevertheless, in the light of the reformed building regulations, it will be for building owners to review whether the buildings that they are maintaining and owning are safe and to take appropriate action.

As I said, we have accepted all 53 of Dame Judith Hackitt’s recommendations and we will be going further. Indeed, we may well go further in scope in the light of the issues that are brought forward.

The final matter raised by a number of Members, particularly the hon. Member for Westminster North (Ms Buck), was the issue of the residents’ voice, the social housing Green Paper and, indeed, the place of social housing in our society. One of the most important legacies of Grenfell must be the rebalancing of the relationship between residents in social housing and their landlords. After the tragedy, we spoke to almost 1,000 people, including the bereaved and survivors of Grenfell Tower. It came through in those conversations, time after time, that residents feel excluded from the discussion about their homes; they feel that their voices are not being heard. I reject the idea that people in social housing can expect only a second-class system. This has been and is fundamentally wrong. Last August, we published our Green Paper, “A new deal for social housing”, and our response and action plan will be published in due course. I have given commitments in the various meetings that I have had around the country that there will be change on that too.

Nothing can undo the pain and devastation caused by the fire at Grenfell Tower. We remain determined to do right by the victims and survivors of the tragedy, and to provide a legacy of real change for them—to deliver fundamental reform, to end the stigma attached to social housing and to honour the memories of those who lost their lives. I thank everybody who has participated in the debate, and share the determination across the House to ensure that nothing like Grenfell can ever happen again.

2.21 pm

Emma Dent Coad: I thank the Minister and all hon. Members for their insightful and detailed comments. I particularly pay tribute to the work that has come out of the all-party parliamentary groups and Select Committees, including the all-party parliamentary fire safety rescue group, of which I am vice-chair. But when will all these recommendations and all this good work be implemented? I just see more delay.

John Healey: In due course.

Emma Dent Coad: Yes, in due course.

As we have seen recently in the press, Kensington and Chelsea Council behaved like a property developer instead of looking after the residential buildings it already owned. With no governmental oversight, it used our money for its own purposes, building a property portfolio to squeeze out social tenants in Kensington and Chelsea—that was actually openly admitted in council. I am sad to say that, despite protestations, the council continues with much of this agenda under a guise of improvement. For example, part of its new council house building programme includes fully private luxury flats. I really hope that the taskforce, which I have been working with quite closely, will report on that in its first report, and I hope we get a really robust response because the council is still falling short. It seems the new council is also determined to end the Grenfell recovery scrutiny committee when it is doing very good work and there is still a great deal of recovery left to be done.
There are various other issues that I hope the taskforce will look at. Our beloved Worthington College is still under threat. The council bought it without any reference to council taxpayers, let alone local councillors. Some £28 million of taxpayers’ money was thrown at a business venture intended for private housing. Where do we expect our young people to get education and training to get them into work, off the streets and out of trouble—something that this damaged community needs now more than ever?

I have said many times, and I will say it again, that if and when the Government regulate, and the council steps up and treats our people with compassion and justice as they would their own family, I will gladly shout it from the rooftops. It is not too late to bring in commissioners to take over the council. We all know very well that if it had been a Labour council that had failed so catastrophically, that would have happened a long time ago, and I would have applauded the Government for that. Until we see that progress, I will continue to berate the council for the duplicity and at times blatant lies—provable—of those who should be held accountable, for the perpetrators of ongoing failure and for those who deny the failure of the system after two years, I will berate those who are complicit through inaction for the incompetence, cover-ups and refusal to make the clear decisions we need to keep people safe in their beds.

We in this House need to view this issue as a far higher priority and with more urgency. I would not wish the horror of Grenfell to happen to anybody else. I plead with the Minister not to wait for another anniversary to announce any kind of progress. We need action, not further consultations.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved.

That this House has considered the response to the Grenfell Tower fire.
due to the regulators’ affordability test—a test that came into effect after the financial crash and after she got her mortgage. She says,

“How can we not afford to pay less?”

Why does this matter to Charlotte and her family? If Charlotte had a better mortgage at a lower interest rate, she would be able to afford more therapies for her disabled children, rather than having to spend so much time crowdfunding from people whose good hearts help to provide the cash she needs to help her kids.

Charlotte is far from alone. Mr and Mrs Adams live in Bournemouth. They took out a Northern Rock mortgage in 2007 that is now owned by TSB’s Whistletree fund, to which the Treasury sold off their mortgage. Mr and Mrs Adams are trapped at a rate of 5%. TSB will not allow them to switch because it says that they are not TSB customers, but they cannot go elsewhere. They failed the regulators’ affordability tests for lower payments on their mortgage, even though they have made all their mortgage payments and their loan to value is just 62%. This has put terrible pressure on the family, causing them to suffer real illness from all the stress.

Mortgage prisoners live in fear of interest rates rising. The whole House knows that we have been living in a period during which interest rates have been very low for a very long time. That might change in the next couple of years. The whole House knows that we have seen an extended economic growth cycle—much longer than is normal—but that could also change in the next few years. That concerns Jayne, who is 50 years old.

Jayne took out a mortgage in 2007. She is on a five-year tracker at 0.5% above base rate, and her mortgage was sold to Cerberus by the Treasury. Cerberus is described in the popular press as a “hound from hell” vulture fund. Jayne is now paying nearly 5% interest on a variable rate and worries about what will happen if rates go up. She cannot go elsewhere because she is self-employed. Her income fluctuates, meaning that she fails the so-called affordability test to be able to have a new mortgage with lower payments, even though she has made all her mortgage payments and the loan to value is just 50%. She is basically paying £4,000 a year more than she would be if she was not a mortgage prisoner.

These cases highlight the plight of Britain’s 200,000 mortgage prisoners, but what about the people who got them into this mess? All those I have referenced are Northern Rock customers. What has happened to Northern Rock’s old boss, Adam Applegarth? Has he been made to atone for his role in blighting the lives of thousands of people? No—not a bit of it. In fact, he got a £760,000 payoff in 2008 and is set to enjoy a £304,000 a year pension.

As I said, there are 200,000 mortgage prisoners. That number is incredibly high and threatens to become even higher. Despite the recent sales, the Treasury still holds £5.5 billion of mortgages for 35,000 customers. If these, too, are sold to unregulated funds, it could mean tens of thousands more mortgage borrowers stuck without hope of escape. On top of that, Tesco has been looking at what the Treasury has been doing and has now announced plans to sell its £3.7 million mortgage book, which

would affect 23,000 customers, and it is understood that Metro Bank is considering following suit. If these books also go to unregulated funds, yet more borrowers could struggle to escape.

That is why it is important the Government now lend a helping hand, not a tin ear. The Treasury should not be selling mortgages to Cerberus or any other vulture fund without proper protection, and the regulators should be doing their bit to help free the mortgage prisoners.

Rushanara Ali (Bethnal Green and Bow) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing this debate. As he knows, those of us on the Treasury Committee have been working to get Ministers and the FCA to commit to reviewing the affordability test and changing it from an absolute test to a relative test. As he sets out very clearly, however, this is a much bigger problem that is going to affect thousands more mortgage holders, because the terms of operating for these companies is changing. The Government and the Minister should consider whether new legislation will be required to prevent these problems happening to many thousands more people under those changes.

Charlie Elphicke: I thank the hon. Lady for that powerful point. Like me, she is a member of the Treasury Select Committee and has been pressing for us to explore this matter on the Committee in greater depth. She has been a true champion on behalf of mortgage prisoners. As the House can see, it is a subject that has crossed the political partisan divide to become an issue on which we need to work together collaboratively to provide a solution and resolution.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing this important debate. We do not always agree on issues, but we certainly agree on this one. He mentioned Cerberus. Constituents of mine, Mr and Mrs Neave, were subject to pretty appalling treatment at the hands of the Clydesdale Bank, which converted their loan into a totally inappropriate overdraft facility without their agreement or signing off on any papers. Then the Clydesdale Bank flogged it off to a Cerberus subsidiary, which has effectively bankrupted my constituents. Does he agree that when banks package up these debts without any permission from the debtors and then flog them off to vulture funds, they are effectively packaging up people’s lives and flogging them off, as they have done to my constituents, Mr and Mrs Neave?

Charlie Elphicke: The hon. and learned Lady makes a powerful point, and a slightly separate point, if I understand her correctly. I have been talking so far about mortgage prisoners. I think she is referencing small business borrowers, which is a separate issue on which I shall also be touching in this debate. It is a very important issue, because they, too, are vulnerable customers, in many cases, and need very similar protections to mortgage prisoners.

There has been some change on the matter of mortgage prisoners. The FCA launched a consultation in March and proposed changing the mortgage affordability rules for customers who are up to date with payments, but there is a shortcoming. Its proposals only give lenders the option to apply the modified assessment. It does not propose to introduce an obligation.
It is also welcome that in July last year UK Finance, the banks’ trade association, launched a voluntary agreement under which lenders committed to supporting existing mortgage prisoners to switch to an alternative product with their present lender, but that does not help people to switch from the vulture funds, and it does not seem to help Mr and Mrs Adams escape TSB’s Whistletree fund, even though they are with the same lender. I hope that the FCA consultation will address and enforce that and make sure that people are not left in that difficult position.

How can we free the mortgage prisoners? These mortgages were taken out many years ago, back in 2007—some even before that—well before the post-crash rules came in. These borrowers have proven their ability to pay for over a decade in making their payments. Why do we have a computer-driven affordability test that ignores the reality of the real world? We have to move beyond “computer says no” to “reality says yes”. These borrowers should be treated as grandfathered as regards the regulatory rules that came in later. Banks should be obliged by the FCA to take people on and treat them as grandfathered, be they existing customers or not, and the new mortgages should be permitted without any regulatory penalty for the bank they move to.

The Treasury needs to take responsibility too. The Treasury’s UK asset resolution division has been selling off Northern Rock’s loan book to funds such as Cerberus. The instruction seems to have been to get the highest price at any price. Indeed, the head of UKAR, who is paid more than £650,000, recently boasted in The Times about how much it had managed to get for its loan books. His pay will rise to £823,000 next year if he completes the loan book sell-off. He is incentivised to achieve value for money not to consider the wider circumstances and necessary protections. I hope the Minister will address that in his remarks. There is real concern that the Government could be facilitating the creation of more mortgage prisoners.

When selling these books, the Treasury should be making sure there are the proper protections so that borrowers do not unfairly lose out. It claimed it did that in the case of Cerberus, but that turned out to have certain shortcomings—something I think the Treasury Select Committee should look into. It is wrong for the Treasury to pursue the highest amount of cash at the expense of vulnerable borrowers who have been placed in a worse position than otherwise would have been the case.

Moreover, if the Treasury is willing to sell mortgage books to vulture funds, what is to stop the likes of Tesco, Metro Bank and many others following that example? That is why we need to consider a wholesale ban on selling these mortgages to unregulated firms—full stop. The best way to achieve that is through the regulation of the whole industry. Regulating mortgages—all mortgages—will ensure that all customers are treated more fairly by mandating best practice in each and every case. That might mean that when books are sold off a little less is achieved because they cannot enjoy the fruits of regulatory arbitrage, but it will mean that vulnerable people get better protections and are more safely and carefully looked after.

There needs to be a better deal for business borrowers as well. The hon. and learned Member for Edinburgh South West (Joanna Cherry) rightly mentioned that issue just now. Business loans above £25,000 are unregulated. Time and again, we have seen the results of this—the Royal Bank of Scotland’s Global Restructuring Group, the Lloyds business support unit, and others. Small businesses are the lifeblood of our economy. We must treat them fairly so that they can focus on what they do best, which is creating jobs and making our country more successful.

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): The hon. Gentleman is making an excellent and forensic speech. He mentions Tesco Bank seeking to sell off its mortgage book. It is encouraging that since Members wrote to the bank—I understand that we have both written, as well as other colleagues—it has indicated it will look to sell it to a good lending bank, but is it not absurd that it is dependent on the good will of the bank selling the mortgage assets, rather than being copper-bottomed through regulation? We want that to be the norm, not just dependent on the bank itself.

Charlie Elphicke: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. He has long been deeply concerned about this issue, and he is right that it is better for the banks to sell to other regulated entities and that there ought to be an element of compulsion, which is why regulation needs to be considered.

The all-party group on fair business banking and finance has been looking at what can be done to protect small business borrowers. I hope that my hon. Friend the Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake), the chair of the APPG, will address that point in greater detail because it is important. We need to make sure that there are protections against foreclosures and covenant-hunting through a financial services tribunal.

Capitalism is vital to the success of our economy and a cornerstone of our way of life, but it must be tempered by responsibility and fairness. We want people to work hard and enjoy success, but we will not tolerate people being taken advantage of. The purpose of this motion is to set the mortgage prisoners free, to protect small businesses from needless foreclosures, to ensure that we deliver fairness for all borrowers and recognise the massive contribution that they make to our economy, and to ensure that this country always puts the consumer interest before the corporate interest.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): I call Gordon Marsden with around eight minutes.

2.40 pm

Gordon Marsden (Blackpool South) (Lab): Thank you very much, Mr Deputy Speaker.

It is a great pleasure and privilege to follow the hon. Member for Dover (Charlie Elphicke). I congratulate him not only on his speech here today but on the ten-minute rule Bill that he brought forward, which has given oxygen to this situation. I also pay tribute to the work of my hon. Friend the Member for Feltham and Heston (Seema Malhotra), who is unable to be here today, and of the hon. Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake), who is in his place and who, with his all-party parliamentary group, has done a great deal to take this matter forward.
This is a situation where Members are drawn into a little-known and complex subject—certainly, as far as I was concerned it was a complex subject—by the real-life experiences of constituents, and that was how I got involved. One of my constituents—I shall refer to her situation shortly—wrote to me about this. In February we had the first mortgage prisoners roundtable, if I can put it that way, in the Jubilee Room; I was there, as were other hon. Members present. They were a very mixed group of people whose lives had been shattered by the process of being mortgage prisoners for anything up to six, seven, eight or nine years. It was clear from that occasion that what the Government, and indeed the FCA, had done so far was inadequate. I subsequently met my constituent and other mortgage customers from in and around the north-west and heard their stories as well. As a result, we now have an all-party parliamentary group specifically dedicated to this issue. The hon. Member for Thirsk and Malton has also been taking it forward with his fair business banking APPG.

I also pay tribute to and thank—we do not often do this, but we should when it is required—individuals in the media. Cat McShane brought this matter to people’s attention in a “Panorama” programme. Hilary Osborne has written about it in The Guardian. William Turvill did a very lively and forensic assessment of Cerberus in The Mail on Sunday. In the other place, my right hon. Friend Lord McFall has taken a very distinct interest, given his previous honourable role in this House as Chair of the Treasury Committee.

Everything that the hon. Member for Dover said about the way in which this process has gone forward without proper due diligence is true. An estimated £9 billion of Northern Rock mortgages remain with the Treasury, and any decision on their future will inevitably affect tens of thousands of customers. In my view, taken from whatever I have been able to glean from the numerous written questions that I have put to the Treasury, there has not been proper due diligence throughout this process. I will explain later why I think that has been the case.

The proposals by the FCA that have been discussed, and will no doubt be touched on by the Minister, only give lenders the option to apply the modified assessment; they will not introduce an obligation. That is the point that we have heard regarding the situation with Tesco. There is the freedom to dine at the Ritz—to dine with responsible lenders—but this will not affect the cowboys and the vulture funds. As the figures show, they will still represent the main problem for the Government and for all the people who are involved with this matter. Other borrowers who had borrowed from now-defunct lenders found that their mortgage had been sold off to unregulated private equity firms that did not offer mortgages and so could not provide affordable deals.

Right from the beginning, this process was flawed and took little account of the position of the people we are talking about. Mortgagees with active lenders have been paying thousands of pounds more due to the ever-increasing gap between the standard value rate and the more competitive market rate. Those who now have a mortgage with an unregulated vulture fund are often forced to pay an even higher rate. This is a double whammy for constituents in places like Blackpool where there are lots of small businesses affected in the way the hon. Member for Dover mentioned, as well as ordinary residents.

Those are some of the issues that the Government need to get a handle on very urgently. A separate issue has been raised with Members of the House by the ME Group about people who were mis-sold their mortgages in the first place. It may well have a point, but that matter will have to go down the compensation route with the Financial Ombudsman Service or the FCA.

I did my best to try to get some further information out of the Government through a number of questions. One question that I posed to the Minister on 13 May was to ask

“What discussions... he and... Ministers... have had with the Financial Conduct Authority on whether Cerberus Capital Management is a fit and proper organisation to purchase mortgage loans from UK banks and his Department via UKAR.”

I must pay tribute to the industry of the person who drafted the reply, because it had eight paragraphs, but all I got was obfuscation of a very high order. The actual question was never responded to. I am afraid that the other questions that I and other hon. Members have asked have also shed more heat than light. Some of the replies that I have had seem to have a standard template that starts off by saying:

“Customers have always been protected in UKAR asset sales.”

It is fairly obvious that that is for the birds. This is another example:

“Whether to offer customers new mortgage products is a commercial decision for lenders and government does not intervene in individual cases.”

If there was ever a better definition of laissez-faire arrogance in a parliamentary question, I would like to see it. This shows that there is a clear and present danger, in market terms, that without intervention UKAR will carry on selling off NR loans to unregulated providers, and that will simply perpetuate the problem that we are all concerned about.

Kevin Hollinrake: In the Minister’s response to the hon. Gentleman’s question about why the loans were sold to an inactive lender, or a non-regulated entity, he said that no bids were received from an active lender. Would another option have been not to sell that debt at all, rather than to sell it to an inactive, unregulated lender that could not provide a service to the people who are subject to these loans?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): Order. I suggest that Members stick to around eight minutes, because the people who will be punished will be those like your good self, Mr Hollinrake.

Gordon Marsden: I absolutely agree with the hon. Gentleman, and I pay tribute to what he has done.

Many of my constituents are affected by this and have come forward with heartbreaking stories. The person I mentioned at the beginning of my speech said:

“I have worked hard to pay off just under £6 over the last few years but it is heart breaking to think I have paid over £20k more had I been able to access other products.”

Another constituent said:

“We got a Northern Rock Together mortgage literally weeks before the banking crash... The mortgage is now with... NRAM. No arrears, making the repayments has been a struggle... but
we’ve always managed... we borrowed over the equity in the house and since the decline in the housing market we are in negative equity.”

This is particularly problematic in northern and midlands areas where the property market has not recovered since the crash in the way it has elsewhere.

There is a moral duty for the Government to act. It was George Osborne’s “flog it” approach to Northern Rock loans in the first place that failed to provide the safeguards for people who were then put into a transfer lottery, with horrendous results. We need to have proper movement. We need to have a formal inquiry, now that we realise the extent of this cover-up. Why were Ministers not prepared to take that forward? The contrast between the way in which the Treasury has dealt with this and how other Departments have dealt with scandals such as the Prudemos scandal is deafening. The FCAs behaviour is as much use as a chocolate fireguard, and it is time that this Government and this Minister came clean about what they are going to do in practical terms.

2.50 pm

George Eustice (Camborne and Redruth) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Dover (Charlie Elphicke) on securing this debate and commend the work of the APPG on fair business banking, and in particular the work of my hon. Friend the Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake).

I have always had an interest in modernising the regulation of our banks. Indeed, in 2010 I introduced a private Member’s Bill—the Secured Lending Reform Bill—that sought to rectify a major deficiency in the law, which is that banks can currently repossess commercial property without even having to go to court to get a possession order. The power that our law grants lenders to repossess property is a rather extraordinary power that should be used lightly, and we should put in place protections for those who offer a lender a charge over their home or other property as a result of that lending. This debate also affects a type of secured lending: mortgages where the home is offered as security. I believe that people who offer their home as security should enjoy special privileges and rights.

I recently had a very sad case in my constituency that is relevant to the issue of mortgage prisoners. My constituent had taken out a mortgage in 2007 with North Yorkshire Mortgages. The circumstances behind that were not altogether happy. This gentleman needed to buy a new bungalow because his son had tragically suffered a sporting accident, and they needed a new property that he could access. His father was also ill, so there were many pressures on the family at that time. Tragically, his son passed away three years later. We all know that bereavement can be difficult, especially the loss of a child, and that affected my constituent’s ability to work at the same level, which affected the household income.

After the first five years, the promotional rate on this interest-only mortgage expired, and it reverted to the standard variable rate of 5.5%. That put pressure on the household finances even further, but when he approached North Yorkshire Mortgages about a switch to a more affordable product, he was told that he could not switch to an affordable product because his income was too low. As my hon. Friend the Member for Dover pointed out, as perverse outcomes of such regulations go, it does not get much worse than this. We are saying to people, “Your income is too low to be able to pay less, so instead we are going to sting you on the standard variable rate.”

My conclusion from all this is that we should revisit the regulations issued by the FCA and reconsider the approach. In particular, the voluntary agreement proposed by UK Finance last year should be placed on a statutory footing. It should not just be a voluntary thing that lenders can opt into. There should be a statutory obligation on them to offer their existing customers a switch to a more affordable product.

If that is something the Government are unwilling to consider, I have a second proposal, with which I will conclude. It is that the Government should, at the very least, issue new guidance to the courts or put in place new regulations under the Administration of Justice Acts to make it clear to the courts that, when assessing any application for a possession order from a lender, there should be a powerful presumption against granting any repossession order where a customer has been refused the ability to switch to a more affordable product.

The reality is this: there will be instances where people have fallen into arrears and ended up facing repossession of their home where the lender itself has been culpable in that default and in the repossession proceedings. In my view, our law should have a powerful presumption against granting any repossession order where a switch to a different product has been refused, and I think that would focus the minds of lenders.

2.55 pm

Rushanara Ali (Bethnal Green and Bow) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member for Dover (Charlie Elphicke), who sits on the Treasury Committee with me, and other hon. Members on securing this important debate.

There is something especially cruel about the way people have found themselves trapped in these mortgages—these much more expensive mortgages—that have already been described. They took mortgages out before the financial crisis—banks lent them the amount they borrowed—but following changes to the affordability tests they are now no longer eligible for mortgage rates that are a lot cheaper. As others have said, they are therefore trapped in more expensive mortgages that are costing them thousands of pounds a year.

These are not the super-rich or the privileged; they are decent, hard-working customers who cannot switch to a more affordable mortgage, even though they have mostly been able to pay. People who have struggled and whose homes are under the threat of repossession are those whose circumstances have changed, but despite what has been happening they have largely kept up with their mortgages, even though that is costing them tens of thousands of pounds. However, that has led to enormous hardship, as the Minister has already heard both here and in various Committees, while other representations have also been made to him and his colleagues.

As I have said, many young people who took out mortgages before the crisis are being punished because the regulations have changed. Understandably, those changes to regulations were about sorting out and learning the lessons from the financial crisis, but they have found themselves caught in the middle, unfairly and unjustly, with the unintended consequence of leaving them trapped in this situation.
As the hon. Gentleman has said, in 2016 the Government sold off £13 billion of Northern Rock mortgages to Landmark Mortgages, which is owned by the US equity company Cerberus. This represents a huge error in public policy and, as others have said, it should form part of an inquiry into what went wrong, what we need to learn from this and how we prevent these errors from affecting many thousands more people in the future.

According to a “Panorama” programme, the US firm misled Ministers and officials on mortgages. Our Government believed in the undertaking that these people would have access to mortgages and competitive rates of interest, and that that would be honoured, but it has not been. Inactive lenders, such as Cerberus and even the Government firm UK Asset Resolution, are not authorised to offer mortgage products to their customers who are stuck with high interest rates.

As has already been said, the FCA estimates that between 120,000 and 150,000 people are stuck in this predicament. Only about 10,000 people may be supported, leaving many tens of thousands more stuck. Some people have paid £40,000 more—or more—in interest than they would have done if they were on a cheaper mortgage interest rate of, say, 2%. This is desperately unfair.

There are many heart-breaking stories, and we have already heard some of them today. One of the widely reported cases was that of Lisa and Mark Elkins. They have had to pay £2,500 a month on their mortgage because their interest rate is now nearly 5%, which is three times the best rate available in the market at the time the report was provided. Lisa and Mark had to borrow tens of thousands of pounds that they would not have had to borrow had they had access to alternative, cheaper, rates. It is not acceptable for people to have to live like that when, through no fault of their own, they find themselves in that predicament.

It is concerning that the Government’s latest sell-off of NRAM mortgages was to the inactive lender Citibank, because—as colleagues have highlighted—they were unable to find an active lender for the deal. It is frankly irresponsible of the Government to pursue such sales, and it sets a dangerous precedent. The Government must consider this issue comprehensively and protect other consumers, as well as addressing the issues affecting current mortgage prisoners.

With other colleagues, I have raised in the Treasury Committee the plight of mortgage prisoners. The Minister probably thinks that I sound like a broken record when he appears before that Committee, but this has gone on for more than a decade. The reality is that the FCA has not acted—it has been too slow. Thanks to pressure from Members across the House, the FCA has finally stepped in to address the affordability test, and the Minister has responded reluctantly, grudgingly, gradually and in a piecemeal way that seems indicative of a number of Ministries at the moment. Perhaps Ministers are distracted by a talent show that is currently going on, but I hope this Minister will carry on working and build on what he has done so far.

I appeal to the Minister to ensure that the change in the affordability test from an absolute one to a relative one is meaningful. The danger is that the FCA will wriggle out of this—frankly, the FCA has been utterly complacent, and it should not have taken so long. The danger is that the FCA will advise banks to provide for these mortgage prisoners, but that there will be no teeth to that advice and banks will not be required to apply the affordability test as a relative test. We will still be stuck in the same position, and very little will change. Will the Minister assure the House that he will instruct the FCA to take this issue seriously and ensure that the affordability test is meaningful, rather than trying to push aside MPs who have been campaigning on this issue by giving them something that looks mildly satisfactory but does not change anything for our constituents who are suffering?

As others have said, the bigger issue at stake is the regulation of mortgage providers. The Government must look thoroughly at how thousands of people are protected, because mortgages are long-term loans. If the rules change in the middle of a long-term loan agreement, those retrospective changes make things very difficult for people and inevitably lead to a trap, and that must be understood and addressed. I hope the Minister will take this issue seriously and protect those who are currently trapped in high-cost mortgages, and that he will also look to the future and be proactive in protecting thousands of others who may find themselves at risk because of decisions that his Department and Government might have made. The Government were warned, but those warnings were not heeded. I hope they will be today.

3.3 pm

Bill Grant (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Bethnal Green and Bow (Rushanara Ali), and I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Dover (Charlie Elphicke) on securing this important debate. I know he feels strongly about this issue, and I understand that his ten-minute rule Bill has been taken up by the Government. This is an emotive topic for nearly 200,000 of our constituents who find themselves trapped with an unaffordable mortgage, in many cases simply because they happened to be mortgaged to a financial institution that foundered during the financial crisis. The majority, although not all, were with Northern Rock or Bradford & Bingley.

For the most part, those families did everything correctly. They saved for their future and made every mortgage payment on time, yet they remain trapped with interest rates of around 5%. They are unable to transfer their mortgage to a more reasonable and current percentage rate of 2% because that is, bizarrely, deemed unaffordable by lenders as a result of responsible lending rules brought about by that same financial crisis—an unhappy and unfortunate irony.

I was very surprised to learn that regulated mortgages could be sold on to unregulated funds overseas, such as Cerberus, which we heard about earlier and is based in the United States. In addition to mortgage prisoners, the issue also affects those who have loans. A family in my constituency had two tailored business loans with the Clydesdale Bank, a reputable name with a sense of security, which they took out in 2011. The Clydesdale subsequently sold the loans, which involved significant sums, to Cerberus. If I may, I would like to quote from my constituent:

Communications received from Cerberus and those responsible for managing our loan on their behalf, were very confusing, with letters being received from various sources: Henrico Ltd, Engage
Commercial, Pepper UK Ltd and Cerberus European Servicing Ltd. There was a complex web of names and numbers and it was impossible to get anyone to answer any queries. Emails were not replied to. One letter intimated our interest was to be a staggering 29%, causing us considerable alarm. It was unclear whether, legally, we needed to pay interest or repayments to Cerberus. We calculated monthly interest payments and paid them to—wait for it—

“Thames Collections Ltd. There was considerable anxiety on our part as to whether even a few pence short payment might be used as an excuse to put us into administration.”

Joanna Cherry: The hon. Gentleman’s constituents’ experience with Cerberus reflects the experience of my constituents, the Neaves. They had a friend’s accountant look at the papers. That person identified overcharging in the region of £75,000 in interest and charges, but they have just not been able to do anything about that. As I say, they have been bankrupted.

Bill Grant: I thank the hon. and learned Lady for that intervention. I regret the journey her constituents had. Fortunately, while it was a very dark journey for my constituents, the result was not as catastrophic, but these are serious matters. As has been said in this Chamber, small business people are the backbone of Britain and they need our support.

The family’s fear was about putting the company into administration to gain access to their assets—assets that were greater than the value of the loan. As I said, there was a reasonable outcome. Eventually, the family, through their own diligence, were fortunate enough to be able to escape and move to another bank. The effect that dealing with this company had on their business and day-to-day lives is still very raw. Yet for more mortgage prisoners, it remains an ongoing concern.

I welcome to a degree the fact that the Financial Conduct Authority is taking this issue seriously—not before time. In March, it launched a consultation on rule changes that would allow mortgage prisoners to move to a better deal. I understand that the consultation closes on 26 June and I encourage anybody in this situation to respond to it. It is also clear that the Treasury is in agreement with the FCA’s stance, with the Economic Secretary to the Treasury, my hon. friend the Member for Salisbury (John Glen), confirming in a written question earlier this year:

“HM Treasury welcomes the FCA’s announcement that it intends to change its mortgage lending rules to move to an affordability assessment for customers seeking to switch to a cheaper mortgage without borrowing more”.

That is encouraging, but sadly it does not include an obligation for it to do so.

With a consensus in Parliament, positive action from the regulator and indeed Government support, one might wonder why there is even a need for this debate. It is simply that the issue has gone on for far too long, has caused too much stress, grief and misery for our constituents throughout the UK, and can be so obviously resolved that it must not be allowed to persist much longer.

I urge the FCA and the Government to act swiftly and provide a binding solution that will extricate our constituents from this unsatisfactory situation. We can free the mortgage prisoners. If I may, I would like to borrow a small phrase from the British Transport police, “See it, say it, sorted”. We have seen it and we have said it. Sort it.

3.9 pm

Martin Whitfield (East Lothian) (Lab): It is always a great pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock (Bill Grant). I thank the hon. Member for Dover (Charlie Elphicke) for co-sponsoring the motion, the all-party groups for their work and the Backbench Business Committee for facilitating a very important, timely debate for the mortgage prisoners.

To own our own home is one of the aspirations of this society, but to have safe, secure accommodation is a basic need within the hierarchy of needs. Without that, nothing else can happen in a family or for an individual, so how has this country, which ranks home ownership so highly, found itself in a position where we are debating the situation of citizens who are trapped in a contract to make repayments to stay in their property, but who are unable to exercise the right to pay off that mortgage debt against their property so that they can benefit from lower interest rates and make lower monthly payments?

Most people’s understanding of home ownership is that they find a property, approach a lender and suggest the amount that they can put forward by way of deposit. The lender then lends them the difference so that they can purchase the property, and they repay the lender the principal sum and an additional sum by way of interest. They have the property, they are repaying the principal and they pay the interest. When someone wants to move, they sell their home, repay the amount owed, acquire their new property and borrow again. Alternatively, if they can find someone who will lend to them more cheaply, they use the money that person lends to repay the original lender and they move forward, freeing up some of the equity in their house or taking the benefit of lower payments.

Some of us are old enough to remember the silly idea of saving with the building society. We would pay in money month after month, building up a track record of financial stability so that when we found a property we would be lent other people’s money so that we could buy our property. That would be decided on the basis of our financial history. At this stage, I would like to cue the music from “It’s a Wonderful Life” with James Stewart, who acted as George Bailey, who chose to whom he would and would not lend other people’s money from the town. If only we could go back to that and say no to the algorithms and the committees that have led to the bundling of what are called “risky loans” that are sold on. The people who are trapped in their mortgages find that they owe money not even to the original lender, but to someone else who might be abroad and for whom there is just an email address and no regulation, and who controls their mortgage, the interest rates and the payment periods. There is nothing that the borrower can do.

That might be an oversimplification, but it is a reality for constituents. As the hon. Member for Dover pointed out, it works out as between 300 and 400 people in every constituency in the United Kingdom. They are our friends, neighbours and families. These are not risky mortgages. These are individuals who, in many cases, have never missed a payment in their lives. These are people who understood that when they took out the mortgage they would go to the ends of the earth and cut other things so that they made the mortgage payments at the end of the month, because they wanted their house.
They made that honourable contract and unfortunately today, it is with another party that, I will say, is less than honourable.

A blame game is developing. There are arguments between the interested parties over the fact that this is all the fault of the EU and the legislation that was tightened around the lending market. There is the almost nonsensical situation that if someone remortgages with an existing lender, which admits that it is the lender, that person can bypass the requirements for the payments but cannot do so with a new lender.

The reality is that the UK Government, in seeking to do right, as they believed they were with Northern Rock and Bradford & Bingley, bundled up and sold mortgages to companies—these vulture funds—such as Cerberus, which we have heard about. They have trapped individuals and families as mortgage prisoners. The action of the UK Government and industry led to the selling of loans that the borrower had no say over to an unregulated, overseas vulture fund. The job of such a fund is not to lend money; it is a financial model to exploit and make profit. It would appear that following the successful stamping out of “poor lending”, a new practice—a new fertile field of exploitative profiteering—has been created, and the UK Government are partly responsible for that.

In my short time in the House, I have sparred with the Economic Secretary possibly more than with any other Front Bencher. It has been a great pleasure, and I know him to be an honourable man. Let me take him back to what he said in a letter, because I genuinely believe it to be the case:

“I can commit to a determined effort to resolve this. There is no reason why these individuals should be left in this very difficult position.”

I hope that today is the day on which he will be able to set out a way to resolve this problem.

3.15 pm

Mr William Wragg (Hazel Grove) (Con): I start by paying tribute to all those involved in the D-day landings 75 years ago today, especially remembering those who gave their lives. We and our allies will forever owe them a debt of gratitude. My constituent Alfred Barlow sadly passed away a few weeks ago, but he had hoped to be in Normandy with other veterans. I mention him particularly as he was a family friend of his.

Like many other Members, I was contacted by several constituents before the debate, and was asked to give examples from their cases. I hope that by doing so I will highlight the human side of the story, which is often lost when we talk about market reviews and regulatory consultations. Important as those processes are to reforming the system, we must remember that behind each broken contract or recalled asset is a home, and an individual or a family.

I want to mention two cases but this issue affects many more in my constituency. One gentleman from Offerton contacted me. He has a mortgage with Landmark Mortgages following the collapse of Northern Rock and was paying a fixed rate of 6% for two years, which was subsequently reduced to a variable rate of 4.7%. That is clearly quite high in the current market and he was paying a lot in mortgage repayments. I wrote to Landmark Mortgages on his behalf to ask if it would consider offering him a lower interest rate now his fixed product had ended. It declined.

Another constituent, from Hazel Grove, took out a 15-year fixed 1.25% above base rate loan secured against a portfolio of properties with the Yorkshire Bank. He placed his trust in the security of the 15-year loan. However, despite his excellent credit ratings and payments being made on time and never in default he soon found himself subject to aggressive sales of further loans on
higher interest rates which he felt bullied into accepting. This meant he was paying considerably more interest each month for many years until he started to struggle with the repayments. He therefore made arrangements on a number of occasions to try to refinance, but each time it was denied.

Then the bank appointed Cerberus Capital Management, a US-based private equity firm specialising in “distressed investing” to take over the loan and act in receivership. I know that some Members make more classical allusions in this Chamber than I do, but of itself this occasion indulge the House with such a reference, because Cerberus is a multi-headed dog that guards the gates of the underworld to prevent the dead from leaving; what an apt description of that company. As my constituent found to his cost, it is not in the agent’s interest to help customers, as it will lose fees, so it undermined any attempts made to resolve matters. Now my constituent has all rents from his property portfolio paid directly to the administrators and lives in constant fear that his family home—or even that of his 84-year-old mother—may be repossessed at any moment.

This is all rather similar to another issue: the treatment of small businesses by banks and the aggressive recall of loans and assets. This is an issue with which many of us are well-acquainted through the excellent work of the all-party group on fair business banking and finance, which has spent many years looking at this issue, most notably at Lloyds and the Global Restructuring Group, but it was a practice endemic across the industry.

I want to highlight a few of the similarities that are critical to this debate. The first is the apparent toothlessness of the FCA and its seeming inability or unwillingness to respond to poor practices in the market. As we saw with the business banking scandal, the FCA is slow to instigate reform, and it is not until consumer victims start piling up at its door that it takes note. It is for the Government to ensure that the FCA shows more appetite and greater urgency to protect the consumer. I welcome the current consultation on responsible lending rules and guidance, but if past experience is anything to go by I am not holding my breath that it will provide the kind of solution that customers need and deserve.

Moreover, the FCA often suggests that consumers seek redress from the ombudsmen or the courts, but that is rarely a viable option. The Financial Ombudsman Service is limited in the size of redress it can offer. For larger claims, litigation is an extremely fraught option due to the inequalities in access to justice between an individual customer and a large business with their armies of lawyers.

As my constituent from Hazel Grove told me:

“The bank squeezes every penny from you so you’re unable to support your family or fight for justice. The court costs of litigation are too high, therefore you’re unable to make a claim or file to protect your rights. I am unable to get legal aid as it’s a civil matter. If you try to bring a claim the banks just say to the court that they will want a cost order, and proof that you can pay the bank’s costs if you lose, which of course I can’t.”

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): The FCA seems to be an organisation that either ignores people, puts us in a pending tray forever, tells us to go away or suggests we go to an ombudsman, but very rarely does it actually do its job. It is time it was sorted out.

Mr Wragg: I need elaborate no further on that excellent intervention from my hon. and gallant Friend.

The scenario I have just described is nearly a carbon copy of that of another constituent, from Romiley, who was told by the FCA to take RBS to court over his business loans. Sadly, in both instances, it is very much a case of David versus Goliath, but without the ability to afford the slingshot.

Finally, and most crucially, I want to highlight to the House the impact that such financial struggles can have on an individual and their family, and the material impact of financial hardship on both mental and physical health must not be underestimated. I have to ask the Minister how we can condone parts of the financial system having such disastrous effects on people.

In conclusion, the move to reduce barriers to switching to a more affordable mortgage for consumers who are up to date with payments and not looking to borrow more, which the FCA is consulting on, is certainly a good thing. However, to my mind the issue is bigger than that. UK financial services, particularly the consumer lending sector, urgently need to start working more in the interests of the customer. We of course accept and welcome the fact that banks and lenders need to make a responsible profit in order to be sustainable as businesses, to continue to provide services, and to continue as an important cornerstone of the economy. However, with the ongoing SME business banking scandal, and with the mortgage prisoners issue now gaining profile, this profiteering to the point of greed is rapidly creating the impression that the banks are going beyond what is responsible.

With that, Mr Deputy Speaker, I shall heed your indications and conclude.

3.26 pm

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): It is a real pleasure to be called to speak in this debate, although it is one that we regret having to have. I commend the hon. Member for Dover (Charlie Elphicke) for securing it. This is a crucial issue that must be gripped with urgency and tenacity by the Government.

Reflecting on the past decade or so, I left school at the time of the financial crash and it has been a feature of my formative years through university and in my career, but it is amazing to think that, a decade on, we are still seeing the toxic legacy of that financial banking crash playing out and blighting the lives of thousands of people across the United Kingdom. The banking system de-leveraged and tried to de-risk its structures, but there was clearly a big revenue gap for lenders, and the number of people who were taking out mortgages fell significantly. As a result, the banks sought to profit as best they could by introducing dubious programmes of selling off mortgages, moving mortgages and spreading between lender borrowing costs and the rates charged to borrowers. So it was impossible for those with standard variable rate mortgages to adjust, even though the market rate reduced substantially below it, and as a result they have been trapped in financial purgatory where they are detrimented to the tune of thousands and thousands of pounds.

It is particularly alarming to see the number of people who have worked hard, and done everything they thought was right in their lives by investing in property to build for their retirement, being faced with
adequately, yet she has found herself in this situation. Her mortgage was performing perfectly by legislation and by regulation. My constituent was never in arrears; she was managing by moral certainty, to do that in moral righteousness. We cannot be at the mercy of such boardroom decisions; it must be an overarching principle in our country, backed by legislation. This harm has been brought to all of us, regardless of political colour, and any appeal to common sense would say that is a supreme injustice, which brings the regulatory environment of this country into disrepute. I urge the Minister to take note of that case. It is representative of many thousands across the UK. It is estimated that 200,000 people in the UK are mortgage prisoners in some shape or form. It is crucial that the Government respond urgently to the situation. It is simply inappropriate for people to be found on that level of hardship. They have done everything right. The Government must provide redress. First, they should ensure that further mortgages are not sold to predatory firms that will trap people in such a way. Secondly, they should provide redress to those who are or have been trapped in this situation, which they find extremely difficult to extract themselves from, and who have suffered a resulting detriment.

This problem has resulted from a legacy of failure of appropriate regulation in the banking system in this country. It is a monstrous evolution, or deformation, that unfurled from the financial crash, and it needs to be addressed urgently. We should be doing everything we can in this House to reduce harms in our society—in this House, we should adhere to that as a governing principle. When we identify harm brought to us by our constituents, we should immediately and forensically identify practical ways to minimise if not eliminate it. This harm has been brought to all of us, regardless of political colour, and any appeal to common sense would dictate that robust processes must be put in place to redress it.

The APPG’s recommendations are very sensible—to legislate to prevent regulated mortgage contracts in a commercial loan from being transferred to a non-regulated environment, so that in future such decisions are not left in the gift of those such as Tesco, and their sense of moral certainty, to do that in moral righteousness. We cannot be at the mercy of such boardroom decisions; it must be an overarching principle in our country, backed by legislation and by regulation.

We must introduce a new ability-to-pay system, to allow those that can return to high-street market rates. My constituent was never in arrears; she was managing her mortgage, her mortgage was performing perfectly adequately, yet she has found herself in this situation. It is not good enough, I am afraid. There must be a better way to do this, and a better way for people to escape the clutches of Cerberus and other vulture funds. It is abominable that the Government actually sold those loans off to that sort of company without sufficient due diligence. In that situation, the Government bear liability to compensate people who have been affected. The equivalent loss of the SVR to the market rate that they could have recouped should be compensated by the Government; I would say that is a perfectly reasonable redress for those who have been trapped for so many years, and faced so much hardship and uncertainty—particularly mature people, who are looking to retire and enjoy their retirement. It is a great shame that in their later years they have been faced with such a stressful situation.

I urge the Minister to act robustly and listen to the points raised by the APPG and colleagues, who have presented their constituency cases and their broader understanding of the issue. I urge the Minister to act robustly and listen to the points raised by the APPG and colleagues, who have presented their constituency cases and their broader understanding of the issue.

3.32 pm

Paul Scully (Sutton and Cheam) (Con): There have been some differences of opinion on how to pronounce Cerberus. I am going to go with Cerberus, the hound of Hades, but of course that will be a moot point by the time people read this in Hansard.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Dover (Charlie Elphicke) on securing this debate from the Backbench Business Committee, and on the fantastic work that he has been doing with colleagues, and with the Opposition Member, the hon. Member for Feltham and Heston (Seema Malhotra). This has been a truly cross-party initiative, to raise the issue of the some 200,000 people affected by this problem across the country. I know that the Minister is listening, and I know that, judging by our past discussions and debates, he has been open to solutions—and looking for solutions—to tackle the difficult banking issues that he has to cover within his remit.

In the Gallery today there are several mortgage prisoners, including my constituent Juliet Peddle. Juliet and her husband took out her mortgage back in 2002 with Northern Rock, and every two years she was able to transfer automatically on to the lowest two-year rate; so she was always going to have that automatic review, ensuring that she had as affordable a mortgage as possible. When Northern Rock failed, she ended up, after the various exchanges, with Cerberus. I am not sure that Juliet knows—I certainly do not—how it was decided which mortgages went down which route, so that some ended up with Cerberus. It seemed to be a bit of a lottery. It means that she and her husband, like many other self-employed people—her husband is a self-employed black cab driver—are locked into the affordability rules, mainly because Cerberus does not have any alternative products. There is nowhere else for her to go within the company.

The BBC alleged in a 2018 “Panorama” programme that Cerberus had told the Government, before it made its bid for the Northern Rock loan book, that it intended to offer better mortgage deals and evolve into a challenger bank. I am interested to know whether the Minister has any insight into whether that offer was actually made. If it was, it clearly has not been adhered to some three years later.
We have heard why this has happened. The Government reforms back in 2014 allowed lenders to waive the affordability requirements for new and existing customers who were remortgaging but not increasing the size of their debt. Unfortunately, as we have also heard, the EU mortgage credit directive, which came into force in 2016 and with which we have to comply until at least 31 October—this is not my leadership bid—prevents lenders from waiving the requirements when a borrower moves to a new lender. That undermines the Government’s reforms by further restricting how mortgage prisoners can or cannot move in terms of their future mortgage. We know that, at present, lenders are able to waive affordability requirements only for existing customers, which does not help Juliet.

We have talked about the voluntary agreement that the FCA has built up to with which 67 lenders have signed up, but again, because Cerberus does not have alternative products for her and her husband to move to, it will not help Juliet. I am interested to hear what the Minister can say to Juliet and all the other mortgage prisoners here today and across the country who are desperate for help. Many of them can afford to keep up their payments, but why should they be paying three times the rate that the rest of us can pay on the open market? It needs to be fair, and it needs to be a level playing field. I hope the Minister will have some answers for Juliet and the Members who have raised this issue today.

3.37 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is always a pleasure to speak in these debates on the banks, and I have spoken in every one. I am sure that my constituents are spoken in every one. I am sure that my constituents are more than glad to know that, on banking issues, I am here to bring their cases to the attention of Ministers. The Minister has always been responsive to my queries and questions on behalf of my constituents, and I look forward to his response not just to me but to everyone else. That is why we are here.

I congratulate the hon. Members for Dover (Charlie Elphicke) and for East Lothian (Martin Whitfield) on securing this debate. They have been engaging on this subject, and they and the Treasury Committee are to be congratulated on sustaining their interest and effort here. We all appreciate their considerable efforts on behalf of all our constituents across the whole United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. I believe that the solution requires a collective and collaborative effort by the regulators, Parliament and the Government. As others have, I call on the Government and the regulators to hold an urgent inquiry into the sale of debt to unregulated entities.

It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam (Paul Scully). He makes a valuable contribution to every debate he speaks in, but his contribution to this debate is especially valuable. It is always a special privilege to follow him. A number of Members have spoken on behalf of the mortgage prisoners, and I add my and my party’s support to the House’s calls for Her Majesty’s Treasury and the FCA to redouble their efforts to address this serious subject properly.

I will mostly speak about the sale of debt by banks, through private equity investors, to third-party funds such as those described as vulture funds. Put simply, these banks generally made judgments to lend and then decided to change their business strategy—every Member who has spoken has given such examples—away from these customers whom they had previously regarded as credit-worthy, often for 10 to 15-year loans. They were often happy to make supernormal profits or bonuses, and then abandon their customers through a form of grooming process, turning these long-term loans into on-demand overdraft facilities; they were basically screwing these people as much as they could. It seems obvious that private equity can make the returns they want only through buying or collecting the debt through substantive write-downs of debt and/or at the expense of those customers who trusted their bank—and they do trust their banks, or at least they used to. They do not trust them any longer. From what I have seen, these former customers are the real losers. The hon. Member for East Lothian estimated that there are some 400 of these customers per constituency, and I know some of the ones in my constituency and am well aware of the problems they have had in trying to get beyond where the banks and the companies that took on their overdrafts and mortgages were.

From the Minister’s response to an urgent question in March 2019 about the hunger striker in Scotland, it seems that some on the open market are paying a third party; it seems that they are impotent, or unable or unwilling to help. As the House and the Minister know, we in the Democratic Unionist party have taken an active interest in pressing for the banks to bring forward a dispute resolution scheme—DRS—for historical banking cases. We are keen to have those matters addressed.

To my knowledge, none of the seven participating banks in the current UK finance scheme believes that cases sold on to third party vulture funds are eligible for the past or future DRS. What is the Minister’s understanding about this specific area in relation to, first, eligibility and, secondly, any retroactivity in relation to the lending standards he mentioned in March?

After the Minister’s remarks then, I wrote to Richard Donnan, head of Ulster bank, which is RBS in Northern Ireland and our state-owned bank, saying:

Secondly I enclose a part of the Urgent Question information from Hansard in relation to a moratorium for current cases from Cerberus whilst the DRS scheme comes in to effect.

Can I have your confirmation that the Ulster (and indeed RBS) are ensuring that Cerberus are staying all legal proceedings (such as those within project Aran?) as set in that exchange with the EST.”

I left my office on Monday night to come here, but on Tuesday my constituency office received a call from Mr Donnan’s office in response to my original letter to him back in March/April. I look forward to his written reply, especially as the bank is largely owned by us as taxpayers. It is always good to remind the banks that the taxpayers—we in this House and everyone else across the nation—are ultimately the people they should be responsive to.

In particular, we have been watching and involved in how the Clydesdale and Yorkshire bank, which was formerly owned by National Australia Bank—it also owned the Northern bank in Northern Ireland, now Danske, until 2004—has been addressing the mediation/remediation efforts on a number of cases involving Cerberus. From my most recent briefing, it seems that
those mediation efforts in working with the victims group CYBGCSG, and CYBG top management on 14 cases have been futile, as there appears to have been no active follow-up process. We have asked for the process and it seems that they have not got off their backsides—it is disgraceful that they have not done so. I understand that our involvement in those informal mediation efforts will lapse imminently, as I have learned that in addition to the legal claim filed by RGL Management last month, an additional legal group claim will be filed for an initial 50-plus cases centred on the CYBGCSG victims group this month. It is unfortunate that no resolution was found to any of those 14 cases, with further peaceful yellow vest protests and potentially hunger strikes across the country now seemingly inevitable.

I will, however, provide some potentially good news, as it is always good to give a bit of good news in a debate that can save us from a bit of doom and gloom. The Minister may recall that I first raised the Danske bank case of the Armstrongs a year ago. He knows about this because I have written to him about it, and he has seen the case paper with the all-party group on fair business banking and finance analysis. I understand that following their yellow vest protests from December 2018 to April 2019 at Danske banks in Northern Ireland and at Danske bank Northern Ireland-sponsored events, and with the upcoming DRS, the bank solicitors have now asked to engage with them. It has taken a long time, but hallelujah for that! At least they are answering and some correspondence is now taking place. I hope and pray that this proves to be a useful process with a positive conclusion, and that my constituents, the Armstongs, do not feel that they need to resume their peaceful “yellow vest” protest from July, with the attendant publicity, at a time when Danske bank just happens to have won the top award in Northern Ireland this week, as a responsible company.

Following correspondence, I am aware that other banks, such as Santander, have agreed to look into some cases prior to the DRS process for SME Alliance members, and that is to be commended. As a party, in the past year we have raised in the House two other cases in which Danske opposed the Financial Ombudsman Service’s considering the complaints on a time-bar basis. Danske can quite easily allow the FOS to consider those complaints now, as I understand that those customers are willing to have their complaints considered by the new FOS team, which was effective from April 2019.

I hope that Danske and the other participating banks will collectively allow those 396 and 447 complaints from 2008 to November 2018, from across the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, to be considered by the FOS, as part of the overall recognition of the need to deal with historical complaints, which it is important we do, and that the Minister will today add his support for their inclusion in the FOS or DRS processes, as a matter of fairness and equality across the historical scheme from January 2000. I understand that both the DRS chair, Lewis Shand Smith, and Mr Andrew Bailey at the FCA believe that to be appropriate, and I know that the matter was raised earlier this week with UK Finance, so there is endorsement and support from very responsible people. Hopefully, a positive response is imminent from all the stakeholders and participating banks.

Finally, the subject of third-party debt is not solely a UK matter; in our neighbouring jurisdiction, the Republic of Ireland, there was a debate on a private Member’s Bill on vulture funds in the Dáil on 28 May, and the Republic of Ireland Parliament also took useful evidence on accounting and auditing in a Select Committee in the same week. Perhaps the Minister can look into what happened there.

I finish by supporting the motion, and call on Her Majesty’s Treasury and the FCA to follow up with a proper inquiry on debt transfer to third parties and to actively consider changes to the law and regulation in this crucial policy area. Most mortgage prisoners and SMEs deserve better from us all. I thank every Member for their contribution and look forward to the Minister’s response.

3.47 pm

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): As an old soldier, I am conscious, as is the House, that at this time 75 years ago, our troops had gained a foothold on Gold and Sword beaches, the Canadians were on Juno and troops were on Utah, but on bloody Omaha, where 2,500 men’s lives were taken on this day 75 years ago, people were still trying to get on to the beach. The sea was red with blood, troops were drowning as they got off the landing craft, and when they did get a foothold on the sand under the water, they had to push bodies away before they were massacred on the beach. In the first waves, 90% of those incredibly brave American soldiers were casualties. We are talking today about something that matters very much to our constituents, but we should also—I have a right to say this. I think—bear in mind the absolute fear and worry of our troops at this moment 75 years ago.

My speech will be short, because Mr Deputy Speaker has told me that it has to be—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): I assure the hon. Gentleman that he can take up to 10 minutes. How is that? I will be as generous as that.

Bob Stewart: Mr Deputy Speaker is such a great man. I thought I was being told off earlier.

My comments will be short because I have spoken about this matter and the associated problems many times in the nine years for which I have been a Member of Parliament. Colleagues on both sides of the House are nodding. Why the heck has this matter not been sorted out? We are meant to sort these matters out—we are meant to be the people who legislate to get such injustices sorted and done. We have failed collectively to do that.

In particular, I want to raise the matter of the injustice done to my constituents—to the D’Eye family. Dean, my friend, is somewhere around, but I am not allowed to point him out. An injustice was done to him and his family by these banks. I am referring to Dunbar Bank, part of the Zurich group, and also the Royal Bank of Scotland’s Global Restructuring Group. I just cannot understand it. Decent people run these associations and they are actually—dare I use the word—screwing people utterly and completely, and it is immoral.

Kevin Hollinrake indicated assent.

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con) indicated assent.
Bob Stewart: I am glad to say that my colleagues agree with me.

It seems to me that it is also far too easy for banks to get rid of their problem by selling on their loan accounts to unscrupulous debt recovery firms—vulture firms—that entangle decent, hard-working people, such as the D’Eye family, in a web. That is utterly wrong. These people cannot get out of it because they just do not have the money, and that is utterly wrong. Originators of loans should not be able to get rid of their responsibilities in this way. It is wrong, colleagues! It is wrong!

I want to end my remarks by talking about the Financial Conduct Authority, which does not seem to have the will or the authority to sort out this matter—to force the banks to investigate and deal with these legacy issues. The Economic Secretary to the Treasury, who is a good friend of mine, is looking at me with a scowl, but in a nice way. He is a great friend and an utterly decent man who would really like to sort out this matter—he has to now after I have said such nice things about him. I am now expecting that to happen.

I truly believe that, somehow or other, we people in this House must get this matter resolved. It is wrong that we have not sorted it for the people whom we represent. I have been here for nine years and feel ashamed that we have not resolved the matter. I thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker—oh, it is Madam Deputy Speaker. I thought that Mr Deputy Speaker had got far enough after I said such nice things about him.

It is a pleasure to follow my gallant and hon. Friend the Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart). I was very touched by his moving words, particularly at the start of his speech. He has done a lot of fine work on this subject, and has spoken in just about every debate on it. I have spoken on this matter, too. My hon. Friend the Member for Dover (Charlie Elphicke) has also done a lot of work in bringing forward these really important issues. He has done a lot of work on the Treasury Committee and has been a great supporter of the all-party group, as has the hon. Member for Feltham and Heston (Seema Malhotra).

After listening to all the excellent contributions today, I have to ask why on earth we let them get away with it. There was unsustainable lending prior to the great financial crash—irresponsible lending to businesses and consumers. I am talking about 120% loan to value and non-status mortgages. These bankers were chasing businesses around, and upping the ante in terms of the deal that they were trying to do, particularly in commercial property. They created the conditions for the crash that followed. They started to bundle up subprime debt and selling it on. They caused the financial crash. Then they went back to these consumers and these businesses and say, “I’m sorry but your business is no longer sustainable.” But that was due to the recession—the recession that they created. They created the situation with mortgage prisoners. There are 140,000 mortgage prisoners, including tens of thousands of small and medium-sized businesses. And it is not just about the businesses themselves; it is about the lives behind those businesses. As other hon. Members have said, it is about the families and the jobs that rely on those businesses. Imagine being a business owner, as I have been for 27 years, and one day having to go back to your wife and children to explain that your business no longer exists—all you have worked for all your life. Can anybody imagine having to have that conversation? These are the conversations that the people represented by all-party parliamentary group are having to have.

McKinsey came along and said, “Here is a great idea. We’ll solve this problem by having bad banks.” But this means that the bankers are incentivised yet again—one over-lend to businesses and consumers, and again to put these businesses inside the “bad banks”. Of course, that is all funded by the taxpayer. But there is no incentive for the banks to look after the businesses or consumers, or to nurture through a difficult time. The incentive is simply to push them into these bad banks, and that is when we—the taxpayers—have to take over. The situation is driven purely by the banks themselves.

Andrew Bailey said himself in a letter to the Treasury Committee:

“The UK’s unique mortgage market coupled with the impact of the financial crisis has created the conditions for mortgage prisoners.”

The bankers did this from start to finish.

Not all bankers are bad, but people should be held to account when this kind of malpractice and mistreatment occurs. Yet, as far as I am aware only one bank has been fined and banned from the sector. Nobody else has been sanctioned for these issues, despite the fact that many people who are responsible are earning millions of pounds in jobs—still within the financial sector. Of course, we pay; the taxpayer pays. Mortgage prisoners and small businesses pay millions as taxpayers, and they are the people who pick up the tab.

The Treasury does fine work in many different areas and I have great regard for the Minister, but I cannot understand how we can suddenly decide to make things worse by selling the debts taken from the banks, putting them into a bad bank, putting them into UKAR and then selling that off to a vulture fund. These vulture funds really should be renamed vampire funds because vultures pick at the carcasses of dead animals whereas vampires suck the blood out of things. These funds are sucking the blood out of mortgage prisoners and small businesses. Many of these mortgage prisoners are not even behind with their payments. They are still managing to keep going, despite the fact that they are paying higher interest rates, yet these vampire funds are sucking the blood out of them. These are unregulated and inactive lenders, meaning that the borrower has nowhere to go.

My constituent Mr Pearson wrote to me to say that he was with Northern Rock. He borrowed the money in good faith, and was persuaded to take out an interest-only loan. That debt was later sold on to what is now
Landmark. He has moved into my constituency but his property is in Dewsbury, and Landmark says, “No, you can’t rent that property out now.” He cannot go on a repayment mortgage, so his loan will expire in 10 years and he will have £98,000 of debts, but he has no way of dealing with the issue. He is totally locked in. How can we countenance a situation where we would allow his debt to be sold on to an unregulated entity on that basis? It is not just about money for the people in this situation. As Mr Pearson says, it is about his mental health and the stress of the situation. It is also about his life chances, because he cannot move on with his life as a consequence of the action of that institution.

We look at this stuff in such a short-term way. Okay, we might have moved a problem out of the Treasury, off the taxpayers’ books and got some money back from it, but surely the problems will return in other areas of the economy, putting pressure on public services—mental health pressures, housing benefit or other things. We take a short-term view of how we should deal with these things.

It is similar with businesses. In 2008, yes many businesses were struggling, but had we supported them through a patient capital approach over the next few years, many of those businesses would have got through the recession and would still be trading today, and jobs would have been created off the back of them. It seems we cannot take the patient capital approach we need.

Why do we not tackle our banks and hold them responsible for what they do? I have asked the Treasury and the Minister about a simple requirement on business lending for banks to treat customers fairly and reasonably in that lending relationship. No such requirement exists at the moment. Business lending is not regulated to any extent. When I ask for a simple requirement for a “fair and reasonable” test in contracts between business borrowers and banks, I am told, “No, because it might stem the flow of lending”. I simply do not accept that in any shape or form. Other countries have a better relationship between their consumers and their banks and their businesses, and their banks and their economies seem to grow fine and their business lending seems to prosper. The Government are a champion for the consumer in many areas. I would like us to be a champion for the consumer in these areas too.

We must find solutions, but whatever solutions we adopt, the banks must pay for them. Yes, there should be an obligation on lenders to provide mortgage prisoners with an alternative option. Perhaps, as the Co-operative Bank has suggested, central Government should become a lender: a centralised lender in a flexible lending environment in which mortgage prisoners can move to a better deal paid for by the banks. We should surely ban the sale of debt to unregulated and inactive lenders. I cannot imagine why we would not do that. If we think it is right to regulate mortgage lending, why would we allow that debt to be sold to an unregulated lender?

Perhaps we could regulate the interest rate that companies such as Cerberus and other entities charge consumers. That is all within our capability. The FCA has said quite clearly that these changes to the relationship are a matter for Parliament, so it is down to us to deal with it. Of course, we have moved forward in terms of a resolution scheme between banks and businesses—with the dispute resolution service—and much of that I attribute to the hard work of the Minister, but there are limitations with that. Ultimately, we believe a financial services tribunal is a much better solution, but the all-party group is engaging with that process.

Sooner or later, as has happened in Australia, we have got to push for a royal commission or public inquiry. I know the Minister thinks it would cost hundreds of millions of pounds and take years, but the royal commission in Australia took 15 months, cost £40 million and resulted in eight resignations of chief executives and chairs of big banks. The problems here are no less than the problems in Australia. We have to get to the bottom of what happened and hold people to account, but we cannot do that without a proper overarching investigation into what happened.

I will close with the regulator. As many others have said, the FCA is far too timid. It let the Royal Bank of Scotland off the hook. Phase 2 of its inquiry into RBS’s conduct was supposed to name names, but it has backed off from doing that, which is inexcusable. It is a similar story with Lloyds Bank and its disgraceful treatment of whistleblower Sally Masterton. She was discredited, constructively dismissed and prevented from working with the police in a fraud inquiry, despite being vital to that investigation. Five years later, it admits that it mistreated Sally Masterton, yet the FCA does nothing. It has not investigated that disgraceful mistreatment, and that cannot be right. I am afraid it starts with us. We must change our approach. That will change the culture of the regulator, and then we will see a change in culture in our banks.

4.4 pm

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake) for all the hard, unceasing work he has put into highlighting this issue and bringing light to what is, I fear, a grave injustice that must be put right.

I also pay tribute to my hon. and gallant Friend the Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart) for—[Interruption] He says that he does not think I should, but I think so, because the opening lines of his speech will be etched in many of our memories on this day of all days. I would like also to pay a compliment to the Prime Minister, who spoke movingly, and inspirationally for all of us, this morning.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Dover (Charlie Elphicke) and the hon. Member for East Lothian (Martin Whitfield) on securing this debate. In my capacity as vice-chair of the APPG on fair business banking, I have seen at first hand the damage done by vulture funds. Reference has been made to the impact on mental health, which is absolutely an issue that damages families and, as my hon. Friend the Member for Thirsk and Malton said, the life chances of the people affected.

In the commercial lending space, RBS, Lloyds, Ulster Bank and AIB have sold off tranches of their books to vulture funds. Most notoriously, Clydesdale and Yorkshire Bank sold off its entire commercial real estate book to the vulture fund Cerberus, leaving thousands of businesses with unregulated contracts at the mercy of an unregulated fund with a rapacious appetite. I doubt that many business people realised that when they walked into
their high street branch asking for a loan to build their dream or grow their business, they could be moved, without their permission and at the stroke of a pen, completely outside the regulatory perimeter to become no more than fodder for the vultures. Asset-stripping of companies is startlingly easy in the face of one-sided contracts and no regulatory protection. The FCA, UKAR and the Treasury will argue that they have insisted that the company sitting between the investors and the customer is regulated and that that has guaranteed that customers will be treated fairly, but this is no better than putting a wolf in sheep’s clothing. The APPG can say with certainty that the experience of businesses from constituencies all over the UK is that these funds certainly have the appetite and character of a wolf.

I would like to say at this point how much confidence I have in the Economic Secretary to the Treasury, who is, in my own experience, a very fair and good man. I enjoyed a visit he paid to Stirling not so long ago, when I discovered through first-hand contact his commitment to principles of justice. He has integrity. That is why, when I raise these issues with him this afternoon, I feel confident that he is facing in the right direction and will wish to do something about the specific cases that have been mentioned and the overall issue that needs to be rectified.

I want to refer to something that has particular relevance to Scotland. CYBG has recently acquired Virgin Money and is rebranding itself as a fresh-faced challenger bank while its former customers battle for their homes and livelihoods in the clutches of Cerberus. Let us be in no doubt: CYBG’s “clean start” and “fresh face” is at the expense of the thousands of hard-working, ordinary citizens who are battling, to this day, because of what has happened to them on account of the actions of Clydesdale and Yorkshire Bank.

I am frankly astounded that Clydesdale is evading its responsibility for the customers whom it sold down the river because it, as a bank, no longer wanted them. I was particularly astounded that it took one of its former customers, John Guidi, to go on hunger strike outside its Glasgow office before it would so much as give him the time of day to discuss his situation. Fortunately, a combination of regulatory pressure and a high press profile has resulted in discussions, but two months on we have still to hear that John Guidi’s situation has been resolved.

On 19 March, in response to an urgent question from the hon. Member for Lanark and Hamilton East (Angela Crawley) about Clydesdale Bank and John Guidi’s situation, my hon. Friend the Economic Secretary to the Treasury said:

“I am pleased that the sale of loan portfolios to third parties is now covered by the standards of lending practice—overseen by the Lending Standards Board—to which Clydesdale is a signatory. That means that it is now committed to ensuring that third parties that buy loans have demonstrated that customers will be treated fairly, and to allowing customers to complain to the original lender if there is a dispute that cannot be resolved.”—[Official Report, 19 March 2019, Vol. 656, c. 943.]

Unfortunately, for all the many victims, some of whom sit in the Gallery, that will be too late. Does my hon. Friend agree that if CYBG, soon to be Virgin Money, is so sure that it conducted itself with impunity when it decided to offload these loans—many where payments were up to date—to Cerberus, it should review those historical cases in line with the new standards of lending practice? That would be the act of a model litigant providing equality of arms.

The four largest banks in Australia—including National Australia Bank, CYBG’s parent company at the time—have recently signed up to that code of conduct, as have the Australian Government. Being a model litigant is in part defined by not relying on a merely technical defence against a claim and considering alternative dispute resolution options. CYBG is at a turning point, and I encourage it to face up to its responsibilities and demonstrate to the public that it really has changed. Otherwise, it too will sadly be shown, in the minds of many people, to be no better than a wolf in sheep’s clothing.

4.12 pm

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): I thank the hon. Member for Stirling (Stephen Kerr) for setting out the situation that so many people face, with no recourse in the system. One of the first cases that I took on as an MP and, I regret, was unable to resolve was that of a former Northern Rock mortgage holder. It was incredibly difficult to get anywhere with the case, because I hit a wall all the way through it. That seems to have been the experience of many Members who have spoken today. The Government must look urgently at that lack of any means to resolve the situation, because without any recourse, nobody will be able to get out of this situation and get their lives back on track.

I pay tribute to the hon. Members for Dover (Charlie Elphicke) and for East Lothian (Martin Whitfield) for bringing this debate to the Chamber and to all those who have contributed. I note the work of the Treasury Committee, which I will be joining soon; its members can look forward to that. The APPGs on fair business banking and on mortgage prisoners have also done a huge amount of work in this area.

The examples given by the hon. Member for Dover show the scandal of this situation, the deep and real harm that has been created and the need for the Government to act. There is no doubt that irresponsible borrowing occurred in the early 2000s, with people taking out loans that they could hardly afford. The starkest example of mortgage prisoners is those who were let down during the 2008 financial crash, but we cannot forget the role of the banks, which offered people higher and higher loans with fewer checks and balances and led customers into a sense of security that nothing could go wrong. The hon. Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake) set out how those who caused that problem began to compound the issue further down the line.

One hundred per cent. loan-to-value mortgages were not unusual, and sometimes even higher value loans were offered for home improvements or debt consolidation, which seems unthinkable now, knowing what we know in a post-2008 landscape. A primary example was Northern Rock’s Together mortgage, which was offered to customers covering between 95% and 125% of the value of their home. When the regulations were tightened after the crash, many people were trapped with higher loans and higher-than-average interest rate payments. The self-same banks that lent them higher amounts than they could afford then refused to give them smaller loans because they failed the lending criteria for borrowing.
Those people were forced to keep their current mortgage and to pay lenders the standard variable rate, which was between 2% and 5% higher than the rates that they would have paid on a market-leading mortgage. This does not sound like a high percentage, but even if people took out a mortgage of £100,000—much lower than the UK average, including in Scotland—in 2008 before the crash, it is conceivable that they could have paid between £2,000 and £5,000 a year on top of what they would have paid on a normal competitive-rate mortgage. Over 11 years, a bank could have been paid between £22,000 and £55,000 more by exactly the same customers who were told that they could afford a cheaper mortgage. The hon. Member for Bethnal Green and Bow (Rushanara Ali) laid that out quite well. Even on the most conservative estimates, we are dealing with substantial and possibly life-changing amounts of money, which could have gone some way to paying off the balance of a mortgage.

It is clear that this lack of access to competitive financial products is bad for individual customers, but there is clearly also a wider negative macroeconomic effect. Hon. Members have mentioned the issues for business customers as well. Businesses going bust is of course bad for the economy, but businesses being forced to go bust is an even wider concern. The hon. Member for Camborne and Redruth (George Eustice) mentioned commercial repossessions, and it is a really deep worry that those in the commercial sector do not have the same rights as those in the consumer sector.

The hon. Member for Thirsk and Malton talked about what is fair and reasonable, and the gaps in business lending. The Government really ought to look into closing these gaps and loopholes to give business customers the reassurance that, when they want to take out a loan, they will not lose everything. The risk of losing everything, as so many people have done in these circumstances, does not give people the confidence to start up small businesses, and it will put others off. It has certainly had a life-changing impact on those who have suffered as a result so far.

When interest rates were slashed to 0.5% by the Bank of England in the aftermath of the 2008 crash to encourage borrowing, the effect this mechanism had on the wider economy was hampered by banks not passing on the cuts in interest rates to their customers. The economy could have been a bit more resilient if the economic levers were able to work in the way intended, so it is vital that we correct this for the future of our economy and make sure that such gaps do not emerge should this ever happen again.

The regulatory tightening following the financial crash is of course to be welcomed and the mortgage credit directive’s affordability checks protect the market from irresponsible lending, but we should not throw the baby out with the bathwater. Regulation should provide a framework for improving consumers’ experiences and for increasing competition in the market, not tying consumers to one onerous regime of payments.

The FCA has committed to changing its interpretation of the mortgage credit directive to a relative test, rather than an absolute one, which will be helpful and is to be welcomed. However, as others have mentioned, its own analysis suggests that this help will be extended to only 20,000 of the at least 150,000 people who have been identified. I understand that some lenders are outwith the regulatory remit of the FCA, and the Government should be looking at extending its remit so it is better able to address this issue. The phenomenon of mortgage prisoners has been wrongly looked on as a legacy issue, but it actually provides a very real threat for the future.

The UK Government must change regulations to stop vulture firms exploiting people to make a quick profit. The regulatory framework at present means that, instead of being able to switch to a better deal, UK mortgage prisoners had their loans sold to vulture firms looking to make such a profit. As hon. Members have mentioned, that has had a very real impact on those trapped within that system, and it is of course the customers who lose out. These firms pack up, move on and do something else, in a very shady way quite often. As Members have said, the practice in relation to SME loans has also forced many into bankruptcy. My hon. and learned Friend the Member for Edinburgh South West (Joanna Cherry) has on a number of occasions raised the cases of her constituents who have been affected.

As we have heard, many of the mortgages have been sold to a subsidiary of the US equity firm Cerberus, Landmark Mortgages. The BBC website states:

“BBC Panorama has discovered Cerberus told the government it was planning to offer homeowners better mortgage deals before its £13bn purchase of former Northern Rock mortgages in 2016. But the company hasn’t provided any new mortgages and 65,000 homeowners are still trapped on high interest rates.”

Cerberus denies that allegation, but it seems pretty clear from the evidence given that that is exactly what took place.

The hon. Member for Hazel Grove (Mr Wragg) laid out well the difficulties faced by his constituents in getting justice through legal aid and other means. This is not a criminal issue, but it is within the civil court system and there is a problem getting any redress—that goes to the other point raised about redress within the system. If someone cannot get legal aid for this issue, and they have no money because they have become bankrupt as a result of the system, how can they go about seeking justice?

The SNP agrees with the all-party group on fair business banking and finance that:

“The practice of selling mortgage books to lenders who are unregulated and/or do not offer new business ought to be stopped.”

We also support its demand for an independent tribunal service, so that customers who have been treated unfairly by Cerberus, or any other firm, can more easily secure the service they deserve—particularly giving recourse to support in cases where people have been subject to the strong-arm tactics described by hon. Members.

Mortgage prisoners are not a phenomenon that is restricted to the 2008 era, and there are a growing number of mortgage prisoners who are being increasing faster than wage growth, there is a trend of creeping back towards those higher loan-to-value mortgages in the market, which is storing up problems for the future. We must learn from the mistakes made in 2008, and stop that in its tracks before more people become trapped.

As well as taking regulatory steps to free mortgage prisoners who are currently in a difficult situation, action must be taken to ensure that existing mortgage
customers do not find themselves in a similar position. Tesco Bank, which has substantial operations in my constituency, recently announced its intention to sell its mortgage portfolio, citing “challenging market conditions” that have constrained its opportunities to grow profitably. I was happy to sign a letter that was organised by the hon. Member for Feltham and Heston (Seema Malhotra), but in its response Tesco gave no real concrete assurances that those mortgages will be sold to active lenders, and said that things are at an early stage. That leaves many of its customers at risk of being stuck with the same kind of deal that they cannot switch out of. We must do what we can to discourage and disincentivise companies from contributing to what is a failure in the market. I will meet representatives from Tesco Bank soon and put those concerns to them in person. I am worried for customers who currently have mortgages. Many of us in this room will have mortgages, and we cannot say for certain that the mortgages we have today will be the ones we will have tomorrow or in a few years’ time.

As we head through the chaos of Brexit, and potentially to a catastrophic no-deal scenario later in the year, the wider context could not be more serious. The livelihoods of many across these islands could be put at risk, with the inevitable strain on people’s ability to pay their mortgage and on the wider financial system. Some have predicted that a no-deal Brexit would have a similar effect to the 2008 crash, with the difference being that the UK Government appear to be hurtling towards it almost deliberately. I see no upside to putting my constituents and the remain-voting nation of Scotland at that risk by even threatening to go for no deal, never mind enthusing about it as some Tory leadership candidates have been doing.

I and my SNP colleagues have repeatedly called on the UK Government and the Minister to undertake a strategic review of the culture within the banking and financial services industry. For mortgages, the sector should focus on providing patient, long-term investment that supports the economy and promotes productivity, not just making a quick buck. The measures taken following the crash must not be unwound due either to Brexit or to other things in the economy, and we need to see what the protections will be for consumers—both businesses and private individuals. Those vultures who prey on the most vulnerable—the hon. Member for Thirsk and Malton more appropriately called them “vampires”—should be chased out of this industry once and for all.

4.23 pm

Peter Dowd (Bootle) (Lab): I thank the hon. Member for Dover (Charlie Elphicke) for securing this debate, and for his comments about his constituents, who he described as real people with real lives and terrible fears about already high interest rates increasing further. He spoke about the need to move from a computer-driven affordability test to a reality test, so that we can say yes to people and there will be better protections. He also spoke about the need to move from a computer-driven affordability test to a reality test, so that we can say yes to what is a failure in the market. I will meet representatives from Tesco Bank soon and put those concerns to them in person. I am worried for customers who currently have mortgages. Many of us in this room will have mortgages, and we cannot say for certain that the mortgages we have today will be the ones we will have tomorrow or in a few years’ time.

The hon. Member for Camborne and Redruth (George Eustice) talked about the need for a statutory obligation to permit a switch to more affordable products if necessary, and a powerful presumption, if that is not allowed, for non-possession where the switch has been refused. I think that that is a perfectly reasonable position to take.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bethnal Green and Bow (Rushanara Ali) talked about the enormous hardship placed on customers, who are being punished because they have been caught up in the middle of regulatory change. She said that selling off to Cerberus was a major policy failure and that UK Assets Ltd was misled. She also said that the FCA has been complacent, and that Ministers should do something about that particular issue.

The hon. Member for East Lothian (Martin Whitfield) asked why, when we have a land of home ownership, we are allowing such a threat to that home ownership by the practices of unregulated lenders that can be accessed via an email. He said that there are 300 to 400 people affected in each constituency.

The hon. Member for Hazel Grove (Mr Wragg) talked about people trapped by large exit fees or the rigidity of new lending criteria, leading in some cases to the loss of homes and assets transferred to vulture funds. He reminded us that behind each broken product is a person and a home.

My hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow North East (Mr Sweeney) said that part of the legacy of the crash was banks seeking to benefit from the turmoil, with people trapped in purgatory. Let us hope it is purgatory, because you can get out of purgatory. It is very difficult to get out of hell.

The hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam (Paul Scully) gave an example of how his constituents, like so many people, were affected by the transfer to Cerberus and how they are locked in to a poor product, with the consequential impact on their lives and finances of having to pay three or maybe four times the usual interest rate.

The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) called for an urgent inquiry into the issue. He wanted to add his support to addressing this particular subject. He referred to the grooming of customers in order to rip them off even more and how banks have little interest in customers whose mortgages they have sold on, and said that that is not acceptable.

The hon. and gallant Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart) paid tribute to troops on D-day. I think we all support and give our full commitment to that. He then asked why this matter had not been sorted out. He did so in his usual wishy-washy way by skirting around the issue: he simply said that it is wrong for the people we represent and he is right.
The hon. Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake) gave an excellent speech. It was a very considered, thoughtful and forensic speech which asked the question: why on earth do we let them get away with it? Why did we let them get away with it before the crash? They created the conditions and the process, and then they went back to consumers and businesses and said that their businesses, houses or mortgages were no longer sustainable. The impact is on families. The bankers created the conditions for mortgage prisoners and it is really up to us to do something about it.

The hon. Member for Stirling (Stephen Kerr) talked about the damage to people’s life chances. The selling off to vulture funds has led to thousands of people being caught up in unregulated systems, with a lot of asset-stripping going on.

Finally, the hon. Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss) set out the cost of higher interest rates as a result of the lack of access to more competitive rates and the impact on businesses. She made the point that this is not just a legacy issue, but a threat to the future.

I understand that this is the seventh debate that we have held on banking in a year. I have to say that it is a sad state of affairs when we are having a debate on mortgage prisoners and vulture funds. There is something wrong with that and it speaks volumes. I was at a meeting today with about 25 people who are either affected by the issue or who are helping and supporting those who are affected. I suspect that many are in the Public Gallery today and I welcome them. Some are in despair and feel completely powerless against powerful bodies that simply ignore them, and they feel let down by us.

Lenders have an approach to their customers that is simply take it or leave it. Since the global financial crisis, we have heard many voices in this House speaking about the cost of that disastrous period, born out of rapacity, as the hon. Member for Thirsk and Malton said. In some quarters, that rapacity continues. I am sorry to say that UK Asset Resolution Limited, which is owned by the state, has not helped in the curtailment of that culture and has potentially encouraged it, even if by default. As many people have asked: why, for example, has it sold off mortgages to companies that are not regulated? In effect, they have been left at the mercy of those companies by the state and the Government. That is not acceptable. A Government company selling off assets to unregulated companies—it is difficult to believe.

My first question to the Minister is this: why has the Government allowed UK Asset Resolution Limited to do that? What is he going to do about that, and about the 200,000 people financially imprisoned by this scam? I do not accept in any way the Government’s argument that this is a question of being at arm’s length from these matters. How can the Government take such an approach when their citizens are being ripped off? They are in danger of aiding and abetting that ripping off. How can they continue to allow people who pay their payments and seeking to move to a more affordable deal without borrowing more, are being held back by inactive lenders and entities not authorised for mortgage lending.

The practice of selling mortgages and unregulated commercial loans to unregulated funds has been creating mortgage prisoners, exposes businesses to asset stripping and threatens to continue to create further mortgage prisoners and risks to businesses, as laid out in the motion. Yet we seem to be seeing a curious case of blame-shifting. The chief executive of the Financial Conduct Authority referred in evidence to the Treasury Committee last year to a “peculiarity” of EU law. A peculiarity—is that it? Others seem to have suggested that the UK’s interpretation of the law is at fault. At any rate, the directive was brought into UK law in 2016, so the Government of the time and the Government of today have a responsibility to deal with the problem, wherever and whenever it originates. As I said earlier, its origins lie in the reckless behaviour of the those in the banking sector, in the years running up to the crash. They were not reckless in lending to so many individuals, but they were reckless in their general approach to risk and exposure to little-understood derivatives. As a result of their behaviour, the aggressive downsizing of balance sheets meant that people with no history of default were put into high-risk groups and, ultimately, had their mortgages transferred to vulture funds, becoming de facto credit risks despite impeccable credit histories. Many of these funds are outside the purview of standard regulation, and the FCA may in some cases legitimately claim that as a result there is little it can do. However, it must come forward with proposals, rather than just sitting on the sidelines. That is its responsibility.

I pay tribute to all the campaigners who have brought this matter to the attention of the House, including the hon. Member for Thirsk and Malton and the all-party parliamentary group on fair business banking. They have been absolute stalwarts in pursuing the matter. I urge the Government to move as quickly as possible to establish whether the problem lies in EU regulation or in its interpretation, and to address it as swiftly as possible.

I do not accept in any way the Government’s argument that this is a question of being at arm’s length from these matters. How can the Government take such an approach when their citizens are being ripped off? I remind Members that in one fashion or another, the banking bail-out cost £1.5 trillion to put right, according to the Office for National Statistics.

We are hearing today about one group who have particularly suffered as a result of the financial meltdown and the decisions that have been taken since. For many Members of this House—and members of the public—who have mortgages, it seems unconscionable that we have not been able to refinance them at more competitive rates. The ability to do so is part of a healthy mortgage market that does not allow lenders to abuse their positions. The reality of those locked into interest rates that are sometimes three times the going rate can be horrendous, as we have heard time and again today from the 14 or 15 Members who spoke.

How can it be possible that people are ineligible for a mortgage when they will be paying less? That question has been asked so many times today. What a bizarre state of affairs. It will cost people less than their current mortgage so they cannot have it. Did we bail out the system only to allow the system to continue to penalise people who have not failed to keep up payments? These consumers, despite being up-to-date with their mortgage payments and seeking to move to a more affordable deal without borrowing more, are being held back by inactive lenders and entities not authorised for mortgage lending.

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I am glad that the hon. Member for Hazel Grove referred to Cerberus, which features in Greek mythology. This particular three-headed dog, however, locked victims not just in hell but in negativity, repetition and hopelessness. This dog is symbolic of the inability of people to leave because they are trapped in an expensive mortgage hell. The Government must now put it on a leash, and sort out the rules.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Before I call the Minister, let me echo the words of the hon. Member for Bootle (Peter Dowd) in welcoming to the Public Gallery a great many people who are interested and involved in this subject, and who, I gather, have met Members this afternoon. I see Members assenting to that.

I draw attention to this because we so often hear criticism of what happens in the Chamber, and hear it described as a circus or a bear pit. It is delightful for once to be able to show the people who care about this subject that when matters are debated properly, thoughtfully, forensically and collaboratively here in the Chamber, it makes a difference.

4.37 pm

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (John Glen): I am grateful for the opportunity to speak on behalf of the Government about an issue which I know has caused widespread concern throughout the House. A range of matters have been raised in the 13 Back-Bench speeches that we have heard today. I will do my best to respond to the points that have been raised, but if I am unable to respond to all of them, I will write to the Members concerned.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Dover (Charlie Elphicke) for securing this important debate. He has worked tirelessly to raise awareness, both as a founder member of the all-party parliamentary group on mortgage prisoners and through his recent ten-minute rule Bill, the Banking (Consumer and Small Business Protection) Bill.

It may be helpful if I begin by briefly reminding the House of the background to this matter, and, in particular, the reasons why the Government have sought to tighten mortgage lending regulations in recent years. In the aftermath of the banking crisis, there was a consensus that the prevailing regulatory framework at that time had left UK borrowers exposed to lax lending practices, with lenders providing mortgages without adequately checking borrowers’ ability to repay them. That enabled some to secure self-certified mortgages, or mortgages with loan-to-income ratios of 120% or more.

The Government and regulators therefore substantially strengthened mortgage lending regulations to ensure that borrowers would be better protected in the future. The new regulations, resulting from the 2014 mortgage market review, require lenders to conduct thorough affordability assessments to consider evidence of customers’ income and expenditure before agreeing to a new loan. I believe that was the right thing to do. It ensures that consumers can only borrow what they can reasonably expect to pay back, and in doing so it protects borrowers and lenders alike against future economic shocks.

A number of colleagues across the House have raised individual cases that they have encountered and meetings they have had with constituents who are looking in on proceedings today. It is undoubtedly the case that these strengthened regulations made switching to a new provider more challenging. That left some borrowers unable to switch even when they were up to date with repayments and had an unbroken repayments record. That has been mentioned a number of times in this debate.

I recognise that this is a hugely stressful and difficult situation for the individuals concerned, and it is clear to me that they face an unfair regulatory barrier. Therefore, it has been my priority as Economic Secretary to find a solution. That is why I instructed—not reluctantly or grudgingly, but determinedly and assuredly—Treasury officials to work with the FCA, which is ultimately responsible for regulations, to consider ways of helping trapped borrowers switch more easily in future. I recognise the frustration about the rapidity of the changes and I want to set out now where they are at and what we can expect in the coming weeks.

The FCA’s proposed changes will see its affordability test move from being absolute to relative. Questions have been asked about what that will mean but I cannot set that out today because the work is ongoing. However, I will say a little more about what is going to happen. It will enable lenders to accept switching consumers, providing they are up to date with repayments and are not borrowing more. The consultation for these changes will run until the end of this month and I then expect the FCA to implement these changes rapidly—later this year.

Let me give the House a practical example of the difference this will make for consumers. A borrower might have taken out a mortgage under the previous lighter touch regulations but their fixed rate deal has run its course and they are currently repaying their mortgage on a standard variable rate, in keeping with the terms of their existing mortgage contract—although I accept that these are terms that they never thought would lead to them being locked into that higher rate. If they are looking to switch to a new deal, the current affordability assessments may prevent them from doing so—and clearly they do—perhaps because the difference between their income and expenditure leaves little room for margin. However, under the new rules there will be no such regulatory barrier; instead a good repayment history can be used as the reasonable basis for a lender to offer them a new deal.

While I recognise that lenders will want to consider their commercial risk appetite to take on these borrowers, and I recognise and hear the calls from various colleagues across the House about assurances over who will provide these mortgages, I would like to take this opportunity to encourage the lenders to think hard about how they might best support those looking to remortgage to a more affordable deal. I have had conversations about that with chief executives and industry representatives in recent months and I see plenty of innovation across the mortgage market.

Gordon Marsden: The Minister is giving some fairly strong details about what he hopes may come out of the consultation, but that does not alter two facts. First, this will simply be an option, not an obligation. Secondly, given the track record of Cerberus, can the Minister give the House today any assurance that such companies will sign up to this?

John Glen: On the hon. Gentleman’s first point, the regulator is not making up these rules in isolation in an ivory tower. It is working with industry representatives to ensure that the changes it delivers will create an
environment with an effective outcome. There is no point having a solution that does not solve the problem. I cannot set out the range of options that will exist, but I am confident that the work being undertaken by the FCA will lead to an effective outcome. I will come to the hon. Gentleman’s second point later when I talk about the points that he and others made about Cerberus.

Martin Whitfield: Did I hear the Minister correctly when he said that this will not extend to any sum beyond the existing loan, and that there will therefore be no facility to enter any of the equity that has accumulated, in some cases?

John Glen: As I have tried to set out, I am not the arbiter of this specific issue, and it would be wrong for me to be drawn into the outcome before the consultation has concluded. That is imminent, however, as is the implementation of the solution.

Peter Dowd: I completely understand where the Minister is coming from, but it would be helpful if, at some point—not today; I accept that—he could set out the catalogue of metrics that will be used to ensure that these regulations, this interpretation, whatever it is, are operating practically within six, 12 or 18 months.

John Glen: That is a reasonable point to make. This intervention has to be meaningful and it has to deal with the problem of mortgage prisoners. I am very clear about that, and we in the Treasury will need to look carefully at how we evaluate this. As I was saying, I see plenty of innovation across the mortgage market and I look forward to seeing what affordable options lenders can offer to mortgage prisoners who are looking to switch.

Let me turn to the Government’s sales of mortgage books to purchasers that are not active lenders. Much of this afternoon’s debate has focused on the firms that purchase these mortgage books. It is regrettable that the Government have not received any reasonable bids from active lenders, with feedback suggesting that they have limited appetite for these loans. However, I would like to make it clear to the House that the administrators of these mortgage books must be FCA-regulated, regardless of whether they are active lenders. Any consumer whose mortgage is held by one of these firms has full recourse to FCA protections, including treatment in accordance with the FCA’s “treating customers fairly” principles, and the ability to complain to the Financial Ombudsman Service.

I have heard the comments about borrowers having their reversion rates drastically increased. To safeguard against this during asset sales, the Government have put in place contractual protections that have been enhanced to ensure that the terms and conditions of the original loans are honoured and, in the latest asset sale, to ensure that future rate rises are in line with the rates charged by the largest active lenders. This means that a customer will be treated broadly the same as if their mortgage was with an active lender, with payments in accordance with their original contract terms.

Kevin Hollinrake: Will the Minister give way?

John Glen: I am running short of time, but I will give way to the chair of the APPG.

Kevin Hollinrake: The FCA’s own consultation on this states that where firms sit outside the FCA’s regulatory remit, the solution is more challenging. So whatever the Minister says, the FCA believes that we will be making the situation in which a debt is sold on to an unregulated inactive lender more challenging.

John Glen: My hon. Friend made reference in his speech to the distinction between business debts and mortgage debts, but I will clarify my remarks on that specific point to him in writing.

In these sales, the Government also stipulate that there must be no financial barriers put in place to harm a consumer’s ability to switch to a new deal with another lender. Once this FCA rule change is implemented, consumers will be in a better position to change their mortgage, provided that they are up to date with their payments and meet lenders’ risk appetites.

Let me also address the point that was raised regarding the sale of commercial loan portfolios to third parties. Since the financial crisis, it has been clear that the standards of behaviour across the financial sector must improve—I have said it in all the debates that we have held in the 17 months that I have been in office—and that banks must work to restore the trust that businesses have in their institutions.

I concede that I have some differences with my hon. Friend the Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake) over some of his assertions about what would be the best solution, but we have tried to work co-operatively where there is common ground, and that work is going forward. I am pleased that banks are now committed, through the standards of lending practice, to ensuring that third parties who buy loans have demonstrated that customers will be treated fairly, and to allowing customers to complain to the original lender if there is a dispute that cannot be resolved. That will help to ensure that all businesses can resolve disputes if they arise.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Dover for calling this debate. I have tried to address the points that have been raised. I believe it is right that the Government and the regulator introduced more stringent rules after the financial crisis. Rigorous affordability assessments are an important factor in ensuring that a borrower has the means to pay back their loan, as well as maintaining the financial stability of the UK. Unfortunately, however, a minority of borrowers have since found that they can no longer pass those strengthened affordability assessments, despite being up-to-date with their repayments. That is why the Treasury did act, and is working with the FCA to remove the regulatory barrier.

I recognise the urgency associated with securing this solution, and I am urgently working to ensure that the FCA delivers on both what it wants to deliver and what we have asked it to deliver.

Rushanara Ali: Will the Minister give way?

John Glen: No; I shall continue. Borrowers who would like to switch lenders, who are currently up-to-date with payments and are looking to borrow more, can expect to find switching to a new, cheaper deal easier once the FCA changes are implemented later this year and are adopted by lenders. That will apply to all borrowers, regardless of whether they are
with an active or inactive lender. In the meantime, those borrowers whose mortgages are sold to a purchaser that does not offer new mortgage deals will continue to be protected by the FCA principles of “treating customers fairly”.

I hope that that is a full response. I will look carefully over the points raised and write to individuals on any that have not been addressed.

4.51 pm

Charlie Elphicke: This has been a really positive and wide-ranging debate. I thank colleagues in all parts of the House, especially the hon. Member for East Lothian (Martin Whitfield), who helped me secure the debate from the Backbench Business Committee. I thank the all-party parliamentary group on fair business banking, which has worked tirelessly on this, and the all-party parliamentary group on mortgage prisoners, which has also worked very hard. I thank all the members of the public in the Gallery today, many of whom have come from far away to make their representations. It has been an incredibly positive debate—a wide-ranging discussion on the ways in which the behaviours of the banks are unacceptable. Colleagues have asked: “Why have we let them get away with it? How can people not afford to pay less?” Colleagues have also said that unregulated vulture funds such as Cerberus should not be allowed to hold mortgages. The case was made for mortgages to be regulated and for small business borrowers to be better protected. It is time for a new covenant of fairness for borrowers. My hon. Friend the Member for Camborne and Redruth (George Eustice) advocated better protection from repossession.

Finally, I welcome the comments of my hon. Friend the Economic Secretary. He has asked the Treasury and the FCA to help mortgage prisoners, including those with a good repayment history and who have made repayments over many years, to get early parole—to enable them to switch to new mortgages. That is a positive step. Nevertheless, the mood of the House suggests that the behaviour of some of these vulture funds is such that the protections that my hon. Friend claims are in place are not necessarily good enough and that a full mortgage regulation should be held by the Government as a backstop, to be brought forward should the industry not mend its ways and give freedom to the mortgage prisoners.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved.

That this House notes that the practice of selling mortgages and unregulated commercial loans to unregulated funds has been creating mortgage prisoners, exposes businesses to asset stripping and threatens to continue to create further mortgage prisoners and risks to businesses; is concerned that mortgage prisoners are being exploited by such unregulated funds by being kept on high standard variable interest rates and therefore denied the opportunity to take advantage of historically low interest rates or fix their mortgage interest payments to gain certainty over their mortgage payments; is further concerned that businesses continue to be exposed to asset stripping; further notes that many of those unregulated funds pay little or no UK tax while depriving citizens of opportunities and in many cases their homes; believes that HM Treasury should immediately require that HM Treasury and the Bank of England should take all possible measures to ensure that mortgage prisoners are given access to new deals and fixed interest rates, and that banks cease discriminating against mortgage prisoners by offering them less favourable mortgage terms; further considers that the Government should expand the scope of FCA regulation to include all mortgages and all unregulated purchasers of mortgages; and calls on HM Treasury and the Bank of England to hold an urgent inquiry into the sale of mortgage and commercial debt by any financial institution to any unregulated entity, with the findings of such inquiry to be published.
Eden Project: Morecambe and the North-West

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

4.54 pm

David Morris (Morecambe and Lunesdale) (Con): I will give a very condensed history of my beautiful Morecambe and Lunesdale seat, and particularly of Morecambe itself. According to the excellent book “The Lost Resort?” by Roger Bingham, Morecambe gets its name from the Vikings—it means “pleasant view” or “pleasant bay.”

Morecambe has seen its fortunes ebb and flow over the past 100 years. It is fair to say that Morecambe was on the decline 20 years ago. After the two nuclear power stations were built—the tourism industry was kept buoyant by the workers building the power stations—there was a sudden collapse in the local economy. Fast forward to 10 years ago and the dilapidated Midland hotel was bought and completely rebuilt by Urban Splash, which did a fantastic job. That art deco gem still has three iconic Gill murals, one on the ceiling.

Adjacent to the Midland hotel is the Winter Gardens, a beautiful Edwardian theatre that, again, has seen worse times but is now back on the mend due to the efforts of the sadly late Evelyn Archer. She was a leading light in keeping the doors of the Winter Gardens open, despite it having no heating system.

The Friends of the Winter Gardens have restored the theatre to a point where it can put on shows again. Great thanks should go to Professor Vanessa Toulmin, who took over from the legendary Evelyn Archer. The group has raised money over the years and, dare I say it, I enlisted a couple of my friends, David Hasselhoff and Bernie Marsden from Whitesnake, to give their support.

Fortunes are increasing due to the copious Government funding that has been pumped into Morecambe since 2010, but we need more. Opposite the Winter Gardens, and at the side of the iconic Midland hotel, is an area that we refer to as the Bubbles site, which is where the lido used to be a long time ago. The site has attracted the attention of Cornwall’s Eden Project, which wants to make a marine-based project in Morecambe to rival anything that Europe and the Eden Project itself have to offer.

Since becoming an MP, my intention has always been to bring Government investment into Morecambe, which was previously starved of investment. People could not get to Morecambe directly, so they had to go through Lancaster. I am grateful to the Government for helping me to secure £130 million, or thereabouts, for a link road that completely transformed the area. It is estimated that for every £1 that has gone into the link road over the past few years, £6 has been put into the local economy.

Such infrastructure programmes have to pay a dividend somewhere. Although I secured the funding to sort out the Greyhound bridge from Lancaster to Morecambe and the bypass coming in from the M6, we need something to bolster the area’s fortunes and reinvigorate Morecambe.

Morecambe used to have what I loosely call “kiss me quick” tourism. Since we have sorted out the sea wall defences with £40 million of Government funding, we have started to see a renaissance of tourism. We have started to see new hotel chains, including Best Western. That was unheard of only a few years ago. In fact, Morecambe is now starting to move above Lancaster in the league of prosperity, but we need something to secure Morecambe’s future.

Unbeknown to me until chamber of commerce manager John O’Neill told me, the quickest way to the seaside anywhere from the M6 is the Heysham bypass or the bay gateway—the link road that was recently built. Because of that, the Eden Project wants to come along. So we have to look to the future. What would Eden bring to Morecambe? Eden is a unique visitor attraction of regional and national significance. If it comes to Morecambe and it is planned, and if we can get Government funding, it can open in 2023. In the last Budget, the Chancellor approved £100,000—

5 pm

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 9(3)).

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

David Morris: As I was saying, following the Treasury approval of £100,000 in the autumn Budget in 2018, an additional investment of £40 million to £60 million is needed. This has been sought and is closely linked to the wider industrial strategy of the region—not just Morecambe, but the whole north-west region. Eden north will be a catalyst to drive the regeneration of Morecambe and transform the local and wider north-west regional economy. We will want to have school visits coming to Morecambe to see the Eden centre, but by law you can only put a child in a car or a bus for two hours. If the Eden centre is in Morecambe, we will have a catchment area going from Manchester to Glasgow to York, as it would be quite central. Therefore, we would have an educational attraction that would benefit future generations and all generations coming along for the unique eco-tourism of the area. Since opening in 2001, the Cornwall Eden project has contributed £2 billion to the local economy of Devon and Cornwall—that is a huge local investment. As I have said, Eden north is an exemplar seaside town regeneration project for not just Morecambe, but the north-west; it will help out other coastal communities, leading the way for new projects.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): From looking at the plans, it seems as though the Eden project north will be substantially better than the Eden project south; obviously, it will be much more modern, as 18-plus years have passed. I swam in that lido, so may I ask whether there will be a swimming pool at the Eden project for people such as me to go to?

David Morris: That is a lovely thought and I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention.

Bob Stewart: Is that a no?

David Morris: I cannot say, but we will put the plans forward to Eden for my hon. Friend. Eden north is compatible with, directly supports and is coherent with the recommendations made by the House of Lords Select Committee on Regenerating Seaside Towns and Communities, which was published on 4 April 2019 and so is extremely recent. Eden will be
a high-quality, year-round attraction and wet-weather destination. It will be a crowd-puller that engages all ages and all generations, as my hon. Friend alluded to.

**Bob Stewart:** I was young then.

**David Morris:** He was young when he swam there.

**Bob Stewart:** I am not old.

**David Morris:** He is still a young man at heart; I know him very well and he is my good friend.

Importantly, market analysis has identified a catchment of 10.6 million people within two hours, as I have alluded to. This will support a visitor attraction where 760,000 people go to the project annually, with consequent direct and indirect economic benefits. It is a financially sustainable revenue-generating social enterprise that is an employment anchor for the region, with 518 long-term, direct and indirect jobs, helping unemployment in Morecambe to go down even further. It is a long-term project with a long-term value, and it is the economic answer to the £130 million investment from central Government on the M6 link road.

Eden will be a mixture of tourism and education to engage the public so that they feel a part of nature, not apart from nature. In particular, it will bring in a focus on the life and wildlife in the bay. Eden north will celebrate the unique scientific ecosystem of Morecambe bay. Eden in Morecambe will be an icon of health and wellbeing, and of regional culture—a natural wonder and curiosity. As my hon. Friend said, the proposals make the Eden concept look very impressive indeed: like glass mussel shells overturned and spreading out into the bay. It will be phenomenal and will create activities and facilities that will increase the understanding of Morecambe bay as an internationally significant site. It will bring back to Morecambe tourism the prestige that it richly deserves.

Eden will also bring with it an education offer that directly supports a place-based curriculum, in close partnership with all levels of education. A high degree of commitment has already been secured from educational professionals in Lancashire for a long-term education vision. Eden went to Lancaster University with this proposal nearly a decade ago, and here we are talking about it in the House of Commons. It is an accolade for Lancaster University as well as the Eden Project. The college has already struck a memorandum of understanding with Lancaster University, and has been supported by the Chancellor, Lancaster City Council and all the other partners I just mentioned.

As I alluded to earlier, the project will be located in a site of international environmental importance. Morecambe bay is designated as a Ramsar site, as it is the largest continuous inter-tidal area in Britain. It is also an area of special conservation and is in a special protected area.

My community needs Eden. This is a game-changer for us: it will make Morecambe the envy not only of the north-west but of all seaside resorts in the United Kingdom. I have already mentioned the prosperity that it would bring. Although we have had a lot of central Government money, we need more—around £40 million to £60 million. I know that it is a big ask in a time of austerity, but we have already had hundreds of millions from the Government, in a time of austerity, to produce an economic turnaround in Morecambe that is unrivalled in the north of England. I would like to see the money come from Treasury salami slicing. Ideally, it would come directly from the Treasury, although I am not sure that the Chancellor would see eye-to-eye with me on that. I thank him, though, for the £100,000 that he personally allocated to the project. The money could come from the budgets for the environment, education, communities, transport—from across the whole Whitehall sphere.

My constituency is beautiful—as the House knows, I am very proud of it. Morecambe is on the up, and has been for the past 10 years. Regeneration by this Government has fuelled a lot of miracles in Morecambe, but I am here in the Chamber looking for help. Help me to help my community, which deserves this. Help me to secure the jewel of prosperity that is Eden, to be fitted rightly back into the crown of the north-west that is my beautiful constituency, and my home: Morecambe.

5.8 pm

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Rebecca Pow):** It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Madam Deputy Speaker, for my first time at the Dispatch Box. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Morecambe and Lunesdale (David Morris) very much for securing this Adjournment debate on a subject about which he spoke so passionately, and in his usual inimitable style. It is a delight that he is present for my first time at the Dispatch Box.

I have only recently stepped into this role as the Minister for Arts, Heritage and Tourism, and I am delighted to have done so. I am very pleased to be kicking off with a debate on something in which I am personally so interested. It links tourism with many environmental issues and the beauty of our countryside. I am very well aware of how important the tourist industry is to the nation, and how important and significant the Eden Project could be.

I want to look at the value of tourism generally. It contributes a really significant £68 billion directly to the UK economy every year—around 4% of the UK’s gross value added. In the past three years, inbound tourism has hit record levels in the UK, with 37.9 million people visiting in 2018 and spending a significant £22.7 billion. I highlight that because the Economic Secretary to the Treasury is listening to me.
This is a really important industry that we can build on. Tourism is a really wonderful vehicle for spreading wealth across the country, and for reaching some of those parts that perhaps other things do not reach, particularly in more rural and coastal areas.

If we can get visitors out to the highlands of Scotland, the glens, the moors, the peaks, and the Somerset levels, we can do it through tourism. Tourism creates a great many jobs in this country as well. I have seen how important tourism is to the south-west, just as it is, and can be even more, to the constituency of my hon. Friend, as he pointed out very strongly. Tourism creates many opportunities for everybody.

Morecambe, of course, has a very rich tourism heritage, as we have already seen, and has a great deal to offer. I know that my hon. Friend is working hard to ensure that it can build on a strong and sustainable future. Things are looking very positive already. In 2017, visits to the north-west, in Lancashire, hit new heights. I recall going there back in the day, filming a number of television programmes. We based one gardening series in Morecambe, so I do know how much it has to offer and how very beautiful it is.

I was particularly interested to hear about the proposals for the Eden Project in the north-west. The original Eden Project, as my hon. Friend so eloquently explained, is in my region of the south-west, in Cornwall. Having been there filming on a number of occasions, I was completely bowled over by how magical it is and what it has done for the area, because it transformed an old china clay pit in quite a deprived area into this magical biome of plants. People can just walk through this journey of plants. The project has done so much for the local economy. Some 1 million people visited the project last year, bringing in, as my hon. Friend mentioned, an estimated £2 billion for the region. It attracted people not only from the south-west, but from all over the country and, indeed, from all over the world. The project has done a really good job in getting people down to the south-west, introducing them to a whole world of plants from the Mediterranean, the rainforests and Cornwall, and bringing people up close and personal with nature, which, I believe, my hon. Friend would like to do in the north-west.

The project showcases world-class horticulture and environmental sustainability and builds very strongly on education links, which my hon. Friend is keen to promote and support. Crucially, in tourism terms, it has helped to extend the season, so that visitors go not just in the summer but all year round; there is just so much on offer. That is one of the aims of the project in the north-west.

The project has done so much to attract visitors to the Morecambe area. It is an internationally renowned environmental area—a Ramsar site—and is the largest continuous intertidal area in Great Britain. It is a glorious stretch of not just sand, but mud and so on. It is great for wildlife and nature, and there are so many opportunities to be built on.

The Eden Project: Morecambe and the North-West

My hon. Friend highlighted the fact that the Government have already given £100,000 to supporting the development of proposals for the feasibility study, and others have contributed towards that. Ministerial colleagues, such as the northern powerhouse Minister, have been very supportive so far, so that is all encouraging.

The project is of particular interest to me because it builds on the wonderful coastline and natural habitat. The Government are seriously trying to help with regeneration of coastal areas. A recent House of Lords Select Committee report on regenerating seaside towns highlighted the merits of projects such as the Eden Project in helping to regenerate coastal areas. We need to help them by getting people there at times of the year other than the summer. It is tremendous that private companies and investors are looking quite widely at opportunities for linking into the tourism potential across the length and breadth of Britain.

There are opportunities for tourism because it is a booming industry. International traveller numbers to this country are increasing. We are trying to attract even more travelling to our glorious islands and we want them to explore them widely. It is up to the UK to ensure that we have top-quality services to provide to our visitors—not just the best attractions but the best accommodation, transport, food, drink and even the digital links that suppliers use to sell their products, such as websites and so on. Linking into all these opportunities through green tourism can really help.

My hon. Friend touched on what is so special about the Morecambe area. It is an internationally renowned environmental area—a Ramsar site—and is the largest continuous intertidal area in Great Britain. It is a glorious stretch of not just sand, but mud and so on. It is great for wildlife and nature, and there are so many opportunities to be built on.

The Government have already demonstrated how they are building on these unusual and unique places and opportunities to up the tourist offer. We put £40 million into the Discover England fund, which has been working on certain projects. I happened to go to the round-up conference yesterday, to talk about how well lots of the projects have gone. It was my first speech in this role outside of Parliament. There are projects such as using Manchester international airport as a gateway for international tourists, and then ensuring that they spread northwards to the Lake district and Scotland, as well as into Wales, to experience all the exciting opportunities in those places such as the coastline, attractions and food—all of it. That is working so well.

Another project is Visit Lancashire’s “Discover more than just a holiday” project. People can do everything, from beekeeping courses to running courses and cycling tours. Lots of opportunities are being built on. The buzzing for the weekend programme led by Warrington Borough Council encourages travellers from Spain and Portugal to enter the country through Liverpool John Lennon airport and to explore that region. Similarly, the Great West Way is building on the structure of the Kennet and Avon canal and all its spin-offs—Bradford-on-Avon, Bath and further up to the 27 locks at Devizes. I do not know whether anyone here has ever tried going through those locks on a barge—one has to be quite fit. Of course, the cathedral city of Salisbury is also on the way, with the tallest spire in England.

Eden Project: Morecambe and the North-West

[Rebecca Pow]
On the coastal front, as well as the money given to the Discover England fund, which is going so well, the Government awarded the coastal communities fund £2.35 million this year to create major new attractions. I believe that much of that money went to Morecambe bay. I notice that it even funded the refurbishment of the Winter Gardens theatre’s heating system. That might not sound glamorous, but theatre audiences do need to be cosy and warm, so I am sure that will help.

The Secretary of State is well aware of the impact of tourism, and is working so hard with others on the proposed and very exciting tourism sector deal, which I can report is progressing well. I know that lots of people are listening out for what is going to happen with that deal.

Bob Stewart: The Minister sounds extremely enthusiastic about the idea of a north-west Eden Project. In fact, I know she is and I know that the Economic Secretary to the Treasury, although he is a Treasury Minister, shares her enthusiasm. Could the Government salami-slice the money and give a little each year so that come 2024 the £40 million to £60 million is there? Is that how they could do it, and would the Minister support such an idea?

Rebecca Pow: I thank my hon. Friend for his cheeky intervention.

Bob Stewart: No, no; I come from that area.

Rebecca Pow: Aha! The Treasury Minister is here listening, but I think that the money we have already had for the Discover England fund is working really well. It demonstrates the great value we can get from seedcorn money and the productivity it can generate, so I hope the Treasury Minister is listening. That is what we need to build on. There is enormous scope to do that, in Morecambe or wherever else, so it is a good point.

My hon. Friend the Member for Morecambe and Lunesdale mentioned the lido. I do not think they will be bringing back the lido as part of the project—I swam in the one at Bridgwater before it shut—but I am sure there will be a lot of water in the Eden Project, if it ever gets going, because water is involved in plants in almost all the Eden Projects, so perhaps there might be an opportunity there.

In a world where environmental issues and sustainability are rising right up the agenda, the ethos of an Eden Project is going in absolutely the right direction. There is so much to build on, using nature and wildlife and all the benefits people get from that. I think my hon. Friend said he would like to see people being part of nature, which I thought was a very good way of putting it. That could be built into the project and bring so much benefit. His references and ambitions for increasing education and productivity, benefiting the coastal area, and all those things that such a project might bring, are highly commendable. I obviously cannot influence whether it actually comes to fruition, but this is absolutely the right place to raise it, so I thank him for doing so. I wish him well in his endeavours and look forward to hearing how it progresses.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): May I congratulate the Minister on her ministerial maiden speech? I think she has left the House happy this afternoon.

Question put and agreed to.

5.22 pm

House adjourned.
Oral Answers to Questions

The Secretary of State was asked—

Violent Crime: Young People

1. Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): What steps he is taking to divert young people away from violent crime.

2. Alan Mak (Havant) (Con): What steps he is taking to divert young people away from violent crime.

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Sajid Javid): Diverting young people from crime is at the heart of my approach to tackling serious violence. Factors such as domestic abuse, truancy and substance abuse can make a young person more vulnerable to becoming a victim or perpetrator of serious violence. That is why we are investing over £220 million in early intervention schemes to steer young people away from serious violence.

Vicky Ford: The experience of the local police in Chelmsford is that once a young person is in a gang they become indoctrinated and indebted to the gang, and it is hard to turn that round. It is therefore better to invest in prevention, and the role of schools is vital. Will my right hon. Friend work with the Secretary of State for Education and the Treasury to ensure that schools get the resources they need to run proactive initiatives to prevent young people from being sucked into violent gangs?

Sajid Javid: My hon. Friend is absolutely right; we cannot arrest our way out of crime, and early intervention is critical. That is why we have, for example, the £200 million youth intervention fund to do precisely that: steer young people away from violence. She is also right to think about how schools can work much more closely with police and others. That requires more resources, and I am very happy to continue that conversation with the Department for Education and the Treasury.

Alan Mak: Drug dealing and violence across county lines involving young people is a growing issue in my region. What support is my right hon. Friend giving Hampshire police to tackle this issue and help our young people?

Sajid Javid: My hon. Friend is right to raise the issue of county lines and his concern. More support is being provided for Hampshire in particular, with Hampshire police receiving £1.2 million from the £100 million extra that I announced a few months ago for the serious violence fund. Hampshire is also benefiting from the early intervention youth fund, through which we have sponsored a number of projects, including a £400,000 project in Hampshire aimed at supporting young people away from future offending.

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): The Home Secretary referred to youth intervention investment, but that money is spread over several years. As he will know, the Select Committee on Home Affairs asked for the annual breakdown of that money. We are still waiting for that. That matters, because it looks to us as though the additional investment he has proposed adds up to around only 5% annually of the £760 million being cut from youth services.

I know from a meeting in Knottingley in my constituency this morning that antisocial behaviour is rising, and knife crime among young people in west Yorkshire has trebled over the last few years. We need this investment very rapidly and cannot wait. Will the Secretary of State confirm that the Select Committee will get those figures, and that he will give oral evidence to the Committee before the summer recess? His office suggested that he would not.

Sajid Javid: I do plan to give evidence to the Select Committee before the summer recess. I can confirm also that the right hon. Lady will get the numbers that she has asked for. Perhaps she was referring to the £200 million youth endowment fund, but she will know that there is also the £22 million early intervention fund, which has supported some 29 projects already.

Ellie Reeves (Lewisham West and Penge) (Lab): I welcome the Government’s decision to adopt a public health approach to youth violence, but aside from a summit we are yet to see any affirmative action. The Home Secretary recognises that early intervention is important, yet we have seen cuts to our Sure Start centres, our education and our youth services. What urgent action will he take to implement a public health approach? What will he do to step up conversations with Cabinet colleagues to ensure that those vital early intervention services get their funding restored to them immediately?

Sajid Javid: The hon. Lady rightly raises the importance of the public health approach—having a legal requirement for all Government Departments and agencies to work together—but she is wrong to suggest that the only thing that has happened is the summit that the Prime Minister held. The hon. Lady will know that we have already published the consultation, which is ongoing. She will know that, to get good policy, it is right to hold a consultation. I hope that she will input into it and that, when it leads to legislation, we can have cross-party support.

James Gray (North Wiltshire) (Con): The normally quiet and law-abiding town of Calne in my constituency has been rocked in the past two weeks by the brutal murder of 18-year-old Ellie Gould by, allegedly, an under-age...
knife-bearing murderer. I will not ask the Home Secretary to comment on that case, but does he not agree that one very good way of deterring people from carrying knives and taking part in this kind of appalling outrage is by applying the strongest possible sentence to these people to send a message to others who might be that way inclined?

Sajid Javid: May I take this opportunity to extend my sympathy to Ellie’s family for what has happened and their terrible loss? My hon. Friend is absolutely right that to tackle serious violence we need to take action on many fronts. As well as law enforcement and early intervention, it is right to ensure that sentencing is fit for the crimes that have taken place.

Louise Haigh (Sheffield, Heely) (Lab): Part of the Government’s response to the horrifying rise in violent crime has been to commission an independent review on drugs. Given the revelations over the weekend in relation to various Tory leadership hopefuls, is it not time to consider extending that review to consider whether our drug laws and policy are discriminatory, and whether they, in fact, fuel violent crime?

Sajid Javid: The hon. Lady will know that the Government have been very clear, as have previous Governments, that drugs and the crime related to drug gangs are leading to serious violence and all sorts of other serious problems in society and other types of crime. That is why we have taken action on many fronts, but we do want to understand more about drugs and their impact. That is exactly why I commissioned the independent review, by Dame Carol Black, on drugs misuse.

Windrush Victims: Compensation

2. Jessica Morden (Newport East) (Lab): What steps he is taking to compensate victims of the Windrush scandal.

3. Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): What steps he is taking to compensate victims of the Windrush scandal.

5. Helen Hayes: Community organisations working with Windrush citizens, including the Black Cultural Archives in my constituency, report that the compensation scheme simply is not working. The form is too complex, advice is neither accessible nor specialist enough, and the burden of proof is far too high. Will the Minister review the scheme, acknowledge that it is not working, and, as an absolute minimum, provide immediate funding for specialist legal advice to be available not only by phone but in person to every Windrush citizen who needs it?

Sajid Javid: The Windrush victims compensation scheme will do whatever it takes to put it right. What the Home Secretary told the House in April last year was that on聪慧, all new claims have been considered on an individual basis, with any application being deemed as possible. It is a complicated claim form, and indeed with victims of Windrush, the advice they need to fill out the forms, so they are not victimised yet again.

Caroline Nokes: We worked very hard with the independent adviser, and indeed with victims of Windrush, to ensure the claim form was as accessible and as easily understood as possible. It is a complicated claim form, because there are 13 different heads of claims under which people are able to claim compensation, but we have set up a contract with Citizens Advice so they can get independent advice without having to resort to using lawyers.

Helen Hayes: Community organisations working with Windrush citizens, including the Black Cultural Archives in my constituency, report that the compensation scheme simply is not working. The form is too complex, advice is neither accessible nor specialist enough, and the burden of proof is far too high. Will the Minister review the scheme, acknowledge that it is not working, and, as an absolute minimum, provide immediate funding for specialist legal advice to be available not only by phone but in person to every Windrush citizen who needs it?

Caroline Nokes: As I outlined, there is already a contract in place with Citizens Advice to provide that independent advice. There is an ongoing series of engagement events, with taskforce officials from the Home Office attending different community groups across the country, including in London. There have been two events in Newport. It is important that we get this right, which is why we worked with Martin Forde to have a scheme that gave us independent advice. It is important that we work through it. I know that at 18 pages the claim form is quite long, but of course individual claimants have to fill in only the components that are relevant to them, not every page.

Mr Dhesi: This gross injustice with respect to the Windrush scandal is not an accident or a one-off; it is a direct result of the Government’s hostile environment policy. Have the Government considered how their hostile environment might affect migrants from India, Pakistan or Bangladesh now and in the future?

Caroline Nokes: It is important to reflect that roughly half the individuals affected by Windrush had a negative impact pre-2010 under the previous Labour Government. We are determined to put right all those wrongs and ensure that wherever people have come from—people from a wide variety of countries, not simply the Caribbean, have made contact with the Windrush taskforce—they are given the support to go through the process of getting the documentation they need. Well over 4,000 people have secured British citizenship as a result, and over 6,000 people have the documentation they need to prove their right to stay in the UK.

Ms Diane Abbott (Hackney North and Stoke Newington) (Lab): The Minister has to begin to acknowledge communities’ grave concerns about the Windrush compensation scheme as it stands. They think that it is not working. She also needs to bear in mind that this is an ageing cohort, who will probably need more support on average than a cohort that is more mixed in age. The Home Secretary told the House in April last year that we

“will do whatever it takes to put it right”. 

The Minister for Immigration (Caroline Nokes): On 3 April, my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary announced the opening of the Windrush compensation scheme. The forms, rules and guidance were published on the same day. The freephone helpline is available to answer any queries. The scheme will ensure that those who have been affected are able to claim for the losses they faced and receive appropriate compensation.

Jessica Morden: How will the Government compensate Windrush victims such as my constituent who could not work for eight years because of his lack of status, losing his NI contributions and his pension? Are Ministers making sure that in such complicated cases people get the advice they need to fill out the forms, so they are not victimised yet again?
He continued:

"We have made it clear that a Commonwealth citizen who has remained in the UK since 1973 will be eligible to get the legal status that they deserve: British citizenship."—[Official Report, 30 April 2018; Vol. 640, c. 35.]

What progress has been made on those promises?

Will the Minister reconsider some of the worst aspects of the current scheme? It will currently not compensate those who may have been wrongly deported. I quote from the document:

“...it is difficult to determine whether inability to return to the UK is a loss”.

Of course someone being deprived of their home, job, family and community is a loss. How can Ministers say that it is “difficult to determine” whether there is a loss?

Caroline Nokes: I thank the right hon. Lady for her question. It is absolutely because we acknowledge that people have been wronged that, in the last week, I personally have attended two separate outreach events for people who wish to understand the compensation scheme. It is why there are dedicated helplines. It is why we have put in place the scheme with Citizens Advice, so that it can provide advice. I reiterate that 6,470 individuals have been granted some form of documentation and 4,281 have been granted citizenship. As I said, there are 13 different heads of claim, including not only deportation, but loss of ability to work, loss of benefits and so on. We are absolutely determined to make sure that we compensate the individuals affected in a timely manner.

Facial Recognition Technology

3. Mr David Davis (Haltemprice and Howden) (Con): What assessment has been made of the accuracy of the facial recognition technology used by the Metropolitan Police Service.

Mr Davis: In May, San Francisco, one of the most tech-friendly cities in the world, banned the use of live facial recognition technology because of massive error rates and concerns about racial bias in its use. Five United Kingdom police forces use similar cameras and systems. Both the Met and South Wales police have seen a 90%—or worse—misidentification rate of innocent members of the public. It is clear that the cameras carry serious risks, yet no legislation governs the use of the technology; it operates in a legal void. The Minister refers to the Metropolitan police. This is not a decision for a police force to make; it is a decision for Parliament. Will the Minister bring legislation to the House laying down strict guidelines on the use of this technology?

Mr Hurd: My right hon. Friend has a long track record in this area. He is entirely right to raise the sensitivity in finding the right balance between security and civil liberties. On the Met’s numbers, there is a one in 1,000 chance of a false alert, but we need to see the evaluation. I am very clear in my mind that we need to support the police in trialling new technology, but if we are to take the public with us we have to be absolutely sure that it sits inside a regulatory framework that they trust. We believe that there is a legal framework for it, although that is being challenged in the courts. I give him my undertaking that, given the importance of maintaining public confidence and trust, we are doing urgent work to review the regulatory environment in which this technology development sits, including new oversight and advisory boards, because I recognise the fundamental importance of taking the public with us on this journey.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): The police national database contains 15 million images, which have been used in a much less controversial way for static facial recognition since 2014, but police tell me that the algorithm that is used to support the database is out of date and needs investment. Will the Minister confirm that the necessary investment will be made?

Mr Hurd: I can confirm to the hon. Lady that, across a substantial range of technology requirements for the police, the Home Secretary and I are considering the funding requirements of the police in the context of the comprehensive spending review, and he and I have made it clear that police funding is our priority.

Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): In the last year or so, the Met have issued many of their officers with tablet computers, but the feedback I have had from officers and constituents is that very often these are unstable, freeze routinely and can actually mean that work takes longer, so will the Minister talk to the Met Commissioner to ensure that their technology is stable and reliable for officers to use?

Mr Hurd: I have had those conversations with the Met Commissioner because I have heard exactly the same thing from members of the serious violence taskforce and officers on the beat in my own constituency. It is clear to us that mobility—the ability to work on the move without having to go back to the station to fill in reports—is critical to improving police productivity, so we must make sure we get the technology right.

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): What was not known during the Huawei furore was that it was a leading pioneer of facial recognition technology distinguishing between Han and Uighur citizens within the Chinese republic. Are the Government seeking to use this technology as a solution on the British border on the Isle of Ireland?

Mr Hurd: I will not get drawn into that. It is our responsibility as a Government and a Parliament to support the police in pushing the frontiers of what technology can do in law enforcement, but I come back to this fundamental point: we have to take the public with us, and that means the regulatory environment has to be fit for purpose.

Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): The Minister will be aware of the comments of the new independent reviewer of our counter-terror laws at the weekend about our police and security services using artificial intelligence and algorithms in detecting suspicious
behaviour. He was speaking of a future like that in the film “Minority Report” where predictive technology drives everything. Is not the only way to establish the appropriate balance between liberty and security to create a new durable legislative framework that can be properly considered by this House? Why can he not commit to bringing that forward today?

Mr Hurd: I repeat that I am extremely aware of the need, as technology develops in this area and others, for there to be public confidence and trust in it, underpinned by a legislative and regulatory framework in which people have confidence. We feel that that legal framework is in place, but we are reviewing the oversight and regulatory framework in which this all sits, and that is a work of some urgency for me.

Refugee Family Reunion

4. Sir Vince Cable (Twickenham) (LD): Whether he plans to extend the scope of his policy on refugee family reunion. [911211]

The Minister for Immigration (Caroline Nokes): The Government provide a safe and legal route for bringing families together through our existing family reunion policy. These provisions are consistent with our obligation to respect family life under article 8 of the European convention on human rights. We are listening to calls to extend this policy and will continue discussions with stakeholders.

Sir Vince Cable: Ministers will recall that last July the other House passed the Refugees (Family Reunion) Bill overwhelmingly but that it was not introduced here because of lack of parliamentary time. Since parliamentary time no longer appears so scarce, will the Minister introduce it here to help reunite families, many of whom are divided by some very rigid and inflexible rules?

Caroline Nokes: As I said, we are listening to calls to extend family reunion and are watching the two private Members’ Bills very closely. The right hon. Gentleman’s question is of course one for business managers, who I am sure will heed his calls.

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Con): Is my right hon. Friend as concerned as I am that in designing a refugee family reunion policy we do not create incentives that encourage even more people to leave their homes and undertake an extremely dangerous journey in the hope they will bring the rest of their relatives to our country at a later date?

Caroline Nokes: My hon. Friend rightly raises the Government’s concern that allowing children to sponsor close family members might create incentives for more children to be encouraged or even forced to leave their families and risk a hazardous journey to the UK in order to sponsor relatives at a later date. I am sure he agrees that we absolutely want to avoid that because it could play into the hands of criminal gangs already exploiting vulnerable people.

Immigration System

6. Bill Grant (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (Con): What plans he has for the UK's future immigration system.

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Sajid Javid): In December 2018 the Government set out their proposals for a future immigration system in a White Paper, “The UK’s future skills-based immigration system”. The new system will be focused on those with the skills that the country needs, who will bring the most benefit to the United Kingdom.

Bill Grant: My constituency needs migrant workers to support local industry—particularly, but not exclusively, in the health, hospitality, fishing and farming sectors. Will my right hon. Friend reassure my constituents that there will be sufficient flexibility in any post-Brexit immigration system to allow those sectors to flourish?

Sajid Javid: I am happy to give my hon. Friend that reassurance. We recognise that the future system must work for the valuable industries that make this nation great. We are working with many businesses and employers, including some in the sectors that my hon. Friend has listed, to ensure there is proper engagement which will achieve precisely what he has described.

Rosie Duffield (Canterbury) (Lab): On Thursday night, a 17-year-old schoolboy visiting Canterbury from Germany was violently attacked in our city centre. He is now fighting for his life. I thank the Home Secretary for intervening personally to enable the boy’s family to travel to be at his bedside, and I am extremely grateful for his—and his team’s—rapid response, kindness and hard work over the weekend. In the light of this awful incident, will he please reassure me that he is listening carefully to the grave concerns that are being expressed about the dwindling number of police on our streets?

Sajid Javid: I was very concerned to hear about that case when the hon. Lady contacted me, and I am pleased that the young man’s parents are now at his bedside. I can give her the assurance for which she has asked. We have a big police funding settlement this year, which is leading to the biggest increase in police numbers since 2010.

Stephen Crabb (Preseli Pembrokeshire) (Con): I thank the Home Secretary for the support that he has expressed for the amendment drafted by our hon. Friend the Member for Orpington (Joseph Johnson), which has the support of many colleagues on both sides of the House, and which seeks to ease post-study work restrictions on overseas students. Does my right hon. Friend agree that not only is this an economically sensible and useful thing to do, but it will enhance UK soft power as we build global Britain?

Sajid Javid: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. As he will know, we have already announced steps in that direction in the White Paper, but because we want to make it easier for those who come from abroad to study in our universities to stay and continue to lead their lives in the UK. I do believe that we can go further, both
for our own economic benefit—indeed, I think, for our cultural benefit—and, certainly, for the benefit of our soft power.

Mr Adrian Bailey (West Bromwich West) (Lab/Co-op): International students are vital not just for our exports, but for university funding and regional economies. Britain is lagging behind our main competitors in attracting the brightest and the best. What plans has the Home Secretary to add countries such as India to the list of states with fast-track access to tier 4 study permits to help to address that issue?

Sajid Javid: I very much agree with the hon. Gentleman about the importance of international students, including their importance as an export for our economy. He will be pleased to learn that there is no cap on the number of international students who can come to the UK, and that the number who came last year reached a record high. As for fast-track access for certain countries, we constantly keep that under review.

James Heappey (Wells) (Con): My constituent Ken Macharia is under threat of removal back to Kenya, where he will not be able to live openly as a gay man. In the month of Pride, it cannot be right for us to deny him the right to be who he is. More importantly, however, does the Home Secretary agree that Ken’s sexuality should not be the issue? He came here to qualify as a mechanical engineer, and he therefore has skills that we urgently need for our economy. Should we not be letting him stay for that reason, irrespective of his sexuality?

Sajid Javid: I understand why my hon. Friend has raised this case, and I can assure him that the Home Office is taking it very seriously. He will, perhaps, appreciate that I cannot comment on an individual case, especially if it involves an application for a judicial review, but I can reassure him that in cases of this type, at the heart of decision making is the welfare of the individual concerned.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): As has already been pointed out, the Home Secretary has pledged that if he becomes Prime Minister he will reintroduce the post-study work visa. The university sector in Scotland, business, and my colleagues in the Scottish Government have been calling for its reintroduction for some years. The right hon. Gentleman is already Home Secretary, and he has the power to reintroduce it with full effect for Scotland today if he wants to, so will he make a commitment to do so?

Sajid Javid: That is exactly why the proposal is in the White Paper I published earlier this year.

Joanna Cherry: I am disappointed that the Home Secretary does not feel able to make that commitment, but I hope he will maybe follow through on it if he becomes Prime Minister.

May I ask the Home Secretary about something else that is very important to Members in all parts of this House? A recent freedom of information request from one of my colleagues in the Scottish Parliament revealed that 19 children and six pregnant women have been held at the privately run Dungavel detention centre since 2016, and this is despite the Government committing to end the detention of children at Dungavel. Can the Secretary of State explain how this has been allowed to happen and will he commit to ending indefinite detention as part of his future plans for the UK’s immigration system?

Sajid Javid: On the hon. and learned Lady’s first question, it sounds as though she has not read the White Paper yet because it talks about increasing post-study work permits. On the question about detention, we have a comprehensive and detailed policy on adults at risk; we constantly keep it under review, and when there are specific cases we will look at them very carefully.

Fire Services: Overnight Cover

7. Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck (South Shields) (Lab): What assessment has he made of the effect on safety of changes to overnight fire cover by fire services. [91124]

20. Emma Dent Coad (Kensington) (Lab): What assessment has he made of the effect on safety of changes to overnight fire cover by fire services. [911230]

The Minister for Policing and the Fire Service (Mr Nick Hurd): Operational decisions are for each fire and rescue authority to make as part of their work to assess local risk and manage and allocate resources according to their integrated risk management planning process. What we have done is reintroduce independent inspection by asking HMICFRS—Her Majesty’s inspectorate of constabulary and fire and rescue services—to assess how effective each fire and rescue service is in responding to fires.

Mrs Lewell-Buck: I thank the Minister for his response, but the reality is that Government cuts are having a dangerous impact on safety. If Tyne and Wear’s fire and rescue service funding does not increase, this year we could see overnight cover cut by 50% in South Tyneside, putting my constituents and our local firefighters’ lives at risk. When will the Government increase funding to protect our lives?

Mr Hurd: I know there are strong feelings about the funding of Tyne and Wear fire service because we had a debate in Westminster Hall, and I have subsequently met Chris Lowther, the chief, to discuss that. Our view is that the fire service has the resources it needs to continue providing what is acknowledged to be a good service underpinned by very high levels of reserves, but we are approaching a comprehensive spending review in which we will be looking to continue to make sure that the fire service has the resources it needs to do its very difficult job.

Emma Dent Coad: In the Minister’s response of 5 June to my letter about fire service funding he stated that all services had the capacity to respond to high-rise fires, yet the speed of the fire spread we saw yesterday in Barking was terrifying, and if that had happened at night people may well have lost their lives. Seconds count and seconds save lives; is the Minister truly convinced that he has done everything he can to keep people safe in their beds?
Mr Hurd: The whole House will understand the sensitivities of this subject, not least this week, and the fire was indeed extremely intense and unsettling. I congratulate the 100-odd firefighters who attended that scene on their success in getting the fire under control with no serious injury. In response to the hon. Lady’s point, yes of course I take this extremely seriously. I have received assurances from the fire chiefs that the current arrangements around integrated risk planning, the requirements around mutual assistance and the national resilience are fit for purpose, but if anyone has hard evidence to undermine that my door is open.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): In Northamptonshire the fire service has been successfully integrated with the local police service, saving money on administrative overheads and providing more resources for frontline capabilities. Is the Minister going to encourage more such mergers?

Mr Hurd: The answer is yes, and I congratulate Steve Mold and the leadership in Northamptonshire on what they have done to show what can be achieved through really creative collaboration. This is not just about saving taxpayers’ money; it is also about exploring the opportunities to deliver a better service to the public.

Ms Diane Abbott (Hackney North and Stoke Newington) (Lab): We are approaching the third anniversary of the Grenfell Tower tragedy, which, as Members will know, happened overnight. The Grenfell residents had complained about their treatment by the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea and had specifically highlighted the fire risks, but they were ignored. What steps have the Government taken to ensure that similar warnings from those who know most—the residents themselves—are heeded and acted on?

Mr Hurd: I think the right hon. Lady meant to say “stay strong”. I am sure she will be aware that past research has not found to pass the buck here. I should like to ask him to commit to undertaking a wide review of cancer rates among firefighters, to consider implementing a national fire service cancer screening strategy. This is just too important for him not to.

Karen Lee (Lincoln) (Lab): Two years on from Grenfell, firefighters and members of the community still have not been screened for fire-related toxic contamination. Speaking as a former nurse and the mother of a young woman who died of cancer, I find that genuinely unacceptable. Given the dangerous carcinogens that have been found in the area surrounding the building, the Government’s inaction displays a reckless disregard for people’s health, and I hope that the Minister is not going to pass the buck here.

Mr Hurd: I fully understand what the hon. Gentleman is saying. Firefighters are exposed to major risks and highly traumatic situations, as well as to contaminants and toxic agents, so it is even more important that local fire authorities have appropriate strategies in place and that they are properly resourced and, critically, inspected and assessed by independent inspectors, which is what we have introduced. In relation to resources, I come back to the main point that a spending review is imminent, and it will provide an opportunity to ensure that the fire service continues to have the resources it needs to do its job and support its people.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): Some of the things that those in our brave emergency services—whether in the police, the fire service or the ambulance service—are tasked with dealing with are truly horrific and have long-lasting impacts, particularly on family life. What work is being done to ensure that those in our emergency services are always able to access the very best mental health care?

Mr Hurd: My hon. Friend raises an extremely important point. There is a growing awareness and culture in the leadership across the police and fire services about the importance of the welfare and wellbeing agenda. That is why we have supported the first ever national wellbeing service, which is being developed and rolled out across that system, and why we continue to engage with the fire chiefs in order to be absolutely sure that, on top of the money we have provided for the blue light services and for mental health support, we are doing everything we can to ensure that those on the frontline of our response to emergencies are properly supported and that the old culture of “stay strong” can be challenged when it needs to be, because of the trauma that our first responders are often exposed to.
shown an increase in risk. However, this is a source of concern to us, and the fire chiefs have recently commissioned research from the University of Brighton. We will need to wait for that to conclude before agreeing the next steps in relation to the kind of comprehensive universal screening service that she has mentioned.

Counter-Terrorism

11. Jack Lopresti (Filton and Bradley Stoke) (Con): What steps he is taking to provide security and law enforcement organisations with the tools that they need to counter terrorism. [911218]

The Minister for Security and Economic Crime (Mr Ben Wallace): A review of powers was undertaken as part of our updated comprehensive counter-terrorism strategy, CONTEST; and the lessons learned from the attacks of 2016 and 2017 were incorporated. Following the review, the Government launched the Counter-Terrorism and Border Security Act, which received Royal Assent on 12 February 2019.

Jack Lopresti: Our security services are world class, but we know that co-ordination is key, so does my right hon. Friend agree that negotiating security co-operation with our European partners and neighbours and strengthening our alliances around the world should be top-post-Brexit priorities?

Mr Wallace: Yes, I can reassure the House that intelligence sharing will go on unchanged. The relationship between intelligence services under national security, irrespective of our status within Europe, will not diminish, and the same goes for our status within the Five Eyes community—a strong partnership for intelligence. In addition, when it comes to law enforcement tools, our relationships are also underpinned by the 1957 Council of Europe convention on extradition and the 1959 European convention on mutual assistance in criminal matters, and those will continue no matter what the settlement is.

David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): This weekend, the Home Secretary announced as part of his leadership bid a £500 million investment in border security in Northern Ireland, plus ongoing costs. Will the Minister agree to publish the proposals as soon as possible, so that they can be open to public and private scrutiny?

Mr Wallace: The right hon. Gentleman raises an important point about investment in our border. However, I had a quick discussion with the Home Secretary, who does not have the same recollection of what he announced at the weekend. I am sure that if the right hon. Gentleman writes to the Home Secretary, the Home Secretary will set out the position.

Joan Ryan (Enfield North) (Change UK): I was horrified to read that a Hezbollah bomb factory storing three tonnes of explosive materials was discovered in north-west London in 2015—three and a half years before the Home Secretary fully proscribed the antisemitic terror group. Why did the Government wait so long to act? Why were the public and MPs not informed, given the debates that we have had on this issue?

Mr Wallace: The right hon. Lady will know, as a former Home Office Minister, that we do not comment on intelligence operations for obvious reasons. In addition, if Hezbollah was behaving in that manner at that time, that would have been under its military wing, as it was classified, and that would have been an act of terrorism and, indeed, would have been subject to the proscription provisions. I therefore do not think that anything different would have happened. However, as the right hon. Lady knows, the Home Secretary recently moved to proscribe the entirety of Hezbollah, partly because of such cases.

EU Settlement Scheme

13. Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): What steps his Department is taking to promote the EU settlement scheme. [911221]

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Sajid Javid): EU citizens are our friends, neighbours and colleagues, and we want them to stay. The EU settlement scheme enables them to do so, and we launched a £3.75 million marketing campaign in March to encourage them to apply.

Peter Grant: If these people genuinely are the Home Secretary’s friends, colleagues and neighbours, perhaps the Government should start to treat them as such, instead of preparing to make them the victims of another Windrush-type scandal. The Home Affairs Committee recently reported that thousands of EU nationals in the UK run the risk of being left with an uncertain legal future. Does the Home Secretary not accept that it is time to get rid of the application and potential refusal system that they have just now and replace it with a system of right to remain by declaration? That would leave the onus of proof on the Government if they think that someone should not be allowed to stay, instead of making the person prove that they can.

Sajid Javid: The settlement scheme is working incredibly well. To update the House, 800,000 applications have already been made since its launch, with almost 700,000 concluded. The hon. Gentleman mentions Windrush, and if he wants another Windrush, he should continue with the proposal that he just suggested.

Knife Crime

14. Rushanara Ali (Bethnal Green and Bow) (Lab): What steps he is taking to tackle the rising level of knife crime. [911223]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Victoria Atkins): Just some of the actions we are taking to tackle knife crime include: strengthening the law through the Offensive Weapons Act 2019; establishing the national county lines co-ordination centre; consulting on a new duty to support a multi-agency public health approach; launching the £100 million serious violence fund in the spring statement; and providing new lesson plans to schools as part of our #knifefree campaign. We take careful note of the Metropolitan Police Commissioner’s recent comments about knife crime levelling off, and I am sure we all support the police’s efforts to tackle this.
Rushanara Ali: I thank the Minister for her answer, but there were 18,000 assaults and 17,000 robberies involving a knife or a sharp object in the year ending 2018. The Government have cut police officer numbers by 21,000, and two weeks ago there was a murder in Tower Hamlets due to a knife attack. Does she agree that the Home Secretary is not fit to be the next Prime Minister, considering that he has lost control of law and order in his Department?

Victoria Atkins: I have to say that I think this is such a serious subject—I understand the hon. Lady’s comments about her constituency—but I do not think this is the appropriate forum to make those sorts of comments. What I do know is that the Government, working with the police, local authorities, the medical profession and educationalists, are doing everything we can not just to tackle the causes of knife crime through law enforcement efforts but to intervene early to stop young people carrying knives before they take that terrible step, which can affect not only their lives but other families and communities.

Mr Speaker: The hon. Member for Blaenau Gwent (Nick Smith) is welcome to shoehorn his inquiry, Question 16, conveniently into Question 14, if he so wishes, but it is not obligatory.

16. [911226] Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): I have been working with Gwent police and local residents regarding alleged criminality in the village of Cwm. The local police have been great, but clearer 101 call information would ease victims’ concerns. May I ask the Home Secretary to encourage the police to provide more detailed call centre data, including out-of-hours response times and geographic information, for better public involvement and support for our police services?

Victoria Atkins: I am very happy to look into that. The hon. Gentleman will know that, through the Anti-social Behaviour, Crime and Policing Act 2014, there are six powers available to the police and to local authorities and agencies to tackle, in a flexible way, the terrible crimes that can be occasioned by antisocial behaviour.

Mrs Anne Main (St Albans) (Con): Piggybacking on the shoehorn, so to speak, farmers are often victims of rural crime, antisocial behaviour, fly-tipping and the theft of farm machinery. What more is going to be done to help to tackle rural crime?

Victoria Atkins: As the proud Member of Parliament for one of the most rural constituencies in England, I know only too well the trouble that farmers and landowners can have with antisocial behaviour, including, for example, hare coursing. A range of powers is available to the police, depending on the type of criminality involved. I am very happy to involve my hon. Friend in the discussions we are currently having to see what more we can do to tackle hare coursing in particular.

Inshore Fishing Boats: Non-EEA Workers

15. Douglas Ross (Moray) (Con): What recent progress he has made in enabling the fishing industry to employ non-EEA workers on inshore fishing boats. [911225]

The Minister for Immigration (Caroline Nokes): As part of the future borders and immigration system, we have launched a year-long engagement programme to seek the views of stakeholders, including the fishing industry, and I am listening very carefully to what they have to say. I have met representatives of the industry on several occasions, as has my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary, and we are reflecting on the views expressed.

Douglas Ross: The Minister has previously said that: “there was no case for schemes for particular sectors in the immigration system, other than agriculture, which has some unique characteristics.”—[Official Report, 8 April 2019; Vol. 658, c. 153.] I am sure the Minister and everyone accepts that the fishing industry has unique characteristics as well. Although we want local labour to do these jobs in future, they are not ready and able to do them now. Will she look again at this with an open mind, because our fishermen are crying out for a solution?

Caroline Nokes: I reassure my hon. Friend that I was quoting the Migration Advisory Committee when I said that agriculture is a unique sector with characteristics that justify the sectoral scheme, and the Government have certainly listened to that advice. He will know that we are undertaking a year of engagement as part of the proposals set out in the immigration White Paper, and no final decision will be taken on the future system until that is complete.

Mr Speaker: In calling the hon. Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Angus Brendan MacNeil), I am calling no less a figure than the Chair of the International Trade Committee.

Angus Brendan MacNeil (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): That is much appreciated, Mr Speaker. This cuts across the Department for International Trade, of course, and I have a constituency interest.

The Minister talks about a year-long engagement. She told me the very same last May. She said that the Home Office would reflect and ask industry for its views. We hear the same rhetoric today. It is quite simple: she should go to her boss, the Home Secretary—a man who needs to show leadership at the moment—and ask him to lift his pen and get fishing boats working on the west coast of Scotland. It will happen that easily. Get it done before the end of the year.

Caroline Nokes: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question. I do not think I have quite recovered from him appearing in my office asking me to write visas on the back of an envelope for those whom he deemed to be appropriate. It is important that the Home Secretary and I listen to all sectors, take the time to reflect on the advice received from the Migration Advisory Committee and the proposals set out in the White Paper, and make sure that we make the right decision, not simply the decision that the hon. Gentleman is demanding.

Asylum Application Process

17. Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): What steps he is taking to improve the asylum application process. [911227]
The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Sajid Javid): The Home Office is committed to ensuring that asylum claims are considered and protection is granted, where necessary, as soon as possible. We have ambitious plans to improve the system, including developing new service standards to ensure that cases with acute vulnerability are prioritised.

Catherine West: Last December, the Home Secretary said that he would look into lifting the ban on asylum seekers working. Will he please set out his view on whether or not asylum seekers should have the right to seek work after they have lodged their applications?

Sajid Javid: The hon. Lady will know that in certain circumstances asylum seekers can work: after a year and if the occupation is on the shortage occupation list. She is right: I have said that. We continue to look at how we can change this and how we can expand those rights potentially. That work is under review and we will report to the House in due course.

Emergency Services Network: National Audit Office Report

18. Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): What assessment has he made of the implications for his policies of the May 2019 NAO report entitled “Progress delivering the Emergency Services Network”?

[Sajid Javid]: The Minister for Policing and the Fire Service (Mr Nick Hurd): Frankly, we welcome all scrutiny of the emergency services network. It remains an extremely ambitious and very challenging programme, but our intent remains the same: to make sure that our emergency workers have access to the best available communications network. We still believe that the benefits are there.

Chi Onwurah: I have been raising this issue since 2013, when it became apparent that the Home Office was prioritising cost-cutting over the resilience of the communication network that enables our police officers, fire officers and ambulance crews to save lives. This is years late and billions overspent, so when are we going to have a proper plan to deliver this essential network? Will the Minister compensate police forces for the extra they are having to spend because of his incompetence?

Mr Hurd: Our plans have been set out and will continue to be available for scrutiny. The funding of forces will be dealt with through the spending review, but I push back on the hon. Lady' s premise. This has not been primarily just about reducing the costs of the Airwave contract, although that is real. It is also about making sure that 300,000 emergency workers have access to the most resilient, most modern emergency communications network. That is exactly what we intend to deliver.

Antisocial Behaviour

19. Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): What steps he is taking to tackle the recent increase in levels of antisocial behaviour.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Victoria Atkins): We are committed to tackling antisocial behaviour, which is why we reformed the powers available to local areas through the Anti-social Behaviour, Crime and Policing Act 2014. Although we recognise there has been a small increase in the number of people who have experienced or witnessed antisocial behaviour in their local area, we would expect local areas to use the powers in the Act to tackle ASB.

Tom Brake: The Minister is correct; more than a third of respondents to the latest crime survey have experienced or witnessed ASB. Whether we are talking about drug dealing, vandalism, or people riding motorbikes or quad bikes in public places, for example in our parks, it has a real, damaging effect on people's lives. Will she therefore support Lib Dem calls to invest more in community policing? Will she also publicise more effectively the community trigger, so that people know that it exists?

Victoria Atkins: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for raising the point about the community trigger. We, as constituency MPs, can really help to publicise the power of the community trigger and how members of the public can use it to review decisions with which they do not agree. On police funding, he will know that we have just voted through up to an extra £1 billion, with the help of police and crime commissioners, to put into policing. Of course the Home Secretary has set out his commitment to resources as well.

Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con): Question 22.

Mr Speaker: You can come in on this one, man; vehicle crime is manifestly antisocial behaviour.

22. [911232]Mark Pawsey: Very well, Mr Speaker. I recently met two distressed constituents who had confronted a gang inside their home who were trying to steal the keys to their car. Prompt action by Warwickshire police prevented anything too serious from happening, but what steps are the Government taking to prevent crime of this nature?

Victoria Atkins: I am concerned to hear of the experience of my hon. Friend's constituents. He is right to ask about vehicle theft and the terrible impact it can have on victims. Vehicle theft is a priority of my right hon. Friend the Minister for Policing; indeed, he is bringing together industry, the police and others to help to ensure that the response to vehicle theft is as robust and technologically up-to-date as it can be.

Topical Questions

T1. [911233]Jo Swinson (East Dunbartonshire) (LD): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Sajid Javid): As we approach the second anniversary of the Grenfell Tower fire, our thoughts are with the families of the victims and everyone affected by the tragedy.

We continue to increase support for the police and victims of crime. More money has been made available to tackle serious violence, with further allocations to the worst-hit police forces from the £100 million fund. We are making calls to the 101 non-emergency number free from April 2020. I have announced plans to change
the law to give trained police drivers more confidence to pursue suspects, better protected from the risk of prosecution.

Jo Swinson: In his remarks about facial recognition technology earlier, the Minister for Policing rightly spoke about the need to take the public with us. Does the Secretary of State recognise that the imposition of Big Brother-style surveillance and fining people for covering their face with their coat is no way to secure the public’s trust? Will the Government halt the use of live facial recognition technology in policing until there has been a proper public debate, Parliament has considered a framework and there are civil liberties safeguards?

Sajid Javid: I am sure the hon. Lady will agree that it is absolutely right that the police, and those involved in law enforcement more generally, take advantage of changes in technology. Facial recognition is one of the technologies that are advancing and it is right that we test it properly. Police forces are piloting its use. The whole point of a pilot is to look at the results and then determine whether it makes sense to take the pilot forward. That may well include the need for proper guidance and perhaps even legislation.

T2. [911234] Mrs Pauline Latham (Mid Derbyshire) (Con): Is my right hon. Friend aware that the current legal age for marriage in the UK, 16, can lead to exploitation in the form of forced marriages?

Sajid Javid: I am very much aware of that. Forced marriage is of course a terrible form of abuse. The Government have introduced a range of measures to tackle the crime, including the creation of a specific forced marriage offence and the criminalisation of the breach of a forced marriage protection order. My hon. Friend raised the important issue of under-18 marriages. It is right that we consider our position, which is under review.

Carolyn Harris (Swansea East) (Lab): The Government’s call for evidence on violence and abuse towards shop staff is welcome. However, research by the Charity Retail Association shows that more than a quarter of charity shops are reporting an increase in incidents of violence or verbal abuse against their volunteers. Will the Minister commit to ensuring that retail volunteers are included in the review and that they, too, will benefit from any proposed protections?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Victoria Atkins): The statistic the hon. Lady cited is sobering. I see no reason why charity shops should not be included in the review. I encourage all Members of Parliament to advertise the call for evidence, which we are holding precisely because we want to find out the nature and extent of the problem. I very much look forward to discussing it with the hon. Lady in due course.

T7. [911239] Mark Menzies (Fylde) (Con): What measures is the Home Office taking to increase police funding and get more officers on the streets of Fylde?

The Minister for Policing and the Fire Service (Mr Nick Hurd): My hon. Friend has been persistent in making the case for more funding for Lancashire police, so he will welcome the additional £18.4 million of cash in 2019-20, on top of the exceptional grant for the costs of fracking. Chief Constable Andy Rhodes is recruiting additional officers, and I know that my hon. Friend will play his full part in lobbying the police and crime commissioner and Andy to make sure that Fylde gets its fair share of that additional resource.

T3. [911235] Stephen Morgan (Portsmouth South) (Lab): With theatre productions cancelled, couples attacked on public transport and hate speech spouted outside schools, what is the Home Secretary doing ahead of Portsmouth Pride to protect the LGBT+ community?

Sajid Javid: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to raise this issue. I am sure he has in mind the horrific attack that was reported at the weekend and that I condemn in the absolute strongest terms. There is no place in our society for such hate crime. My understanding in respect of that particular incident is that the Met has arrested five individuals. The Government are absolutely committed to tackling all forms of hate crime, including LGBT+ hate crime, and we will continue to do all we can.

T9. [911241] Kirstene Hair (Angus) (Con): I warmly welcomed the implementation of the seasonal agricultural workers pilot scheme that was launched this year, but does the Minister agree that we need to review that scheme this year as opposed to waiting for another year? We know that it works and we know that our soft fruit farms need it. We should have it made permanent and extended as soon as possible.

Sajid Javid: First, I thank my hon. Friend for the work that she has already done to bring this about. She was one of the Members of the House to make the case for the scheme so powerfully and that is exactly why we have it. The intention is to see how it works while we have freedom of movement, but she has raised an important point. I think that it is worth considering an earlier review and I will be happy to discuss it with her.

T4. [911236] Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): Can the Secretary of State advise us: what costs have been incurred to date by the Home Department in preparation for a no-deal exit from the European Union?

Sajid Javid: The Home Office has been preparing for a potential no-deal exit, not because it is what anyone expects or wants, but because it is the responsible thing to do. I cannot tell the hon. Gentleman right here and now what the total costs are, but I am happy to write to him with more detail. But it is right that we make these preparations, whether they are for border issues, immigration issues or customs and security.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): The strong message that came out of the referendum is that people want an immigration system that provides control, but they also want an immigration system that is underpinned by the principle of fairness, where everybody is treated equally, regardless of where they come from in the world. Is the Minister confident that the new system that we put in place will deliver on both those objectives?
They say that perpetrators of organised crime are constantly improving their ability to use new technologies to defraud them, and they have no resistance to having the best and most modern technology possible in the fight against crime.

**The Minister for Security and Economic Crime (Mr Ben Wallace):** One of the biggest challenges is how to get ahead of organised crime. Organised crime uses technology to organise better, and we need to organise better to counter it. The hon. Gentleman will have heard the different views in this House about technology and surveillance, and it is important to get the balance right. Members should be under no illusion that technology is giving the very baddest people in our society a real advantage, and that takes long-term investment to address.

**Tonia Antoniazzi (Gower) (Lab):** Last Thursday, I travelled to the Netherlands with Teagan Appleby’s mother, Emma, to pick up the medical cannabis that has reduced Teagan’s seizures from 300 to four a day. In the absence of NHS prescribing, parents like Emma are having to go abroad, or pay exorbitant import and pharmacy charges. Emma had a UK prescription, so having to go abroad, or pay exorbitant import and pharmacy charges. Emma had a UK prescription, so met the criteria presented to her at border control to the letter. Why, then, did the Home Office make UK Border Force detain the medicinal cannabis that Teagan so desperately needs?

**Sajid Javid:** The hon. Lady will know that I took immediate action to change the law to make medical cannabis available when I first heard about young children who are drug resistant and have severe epilepsy. But rightly—even with that change—it is necessary for a clinician to be involved and for a prescription to be given. Although medical cannabis is now legal with a clinician’s approval, it is still a controlled drug and it is necessary to have some controls to minimise the risk of misuse, harm and diversion. I am very sympathetic to the case that the hon. Lady has raised. We are discussing it with the Department of Health and Social Care and will do all we can to help.

**Several hon. Members rose**—

**Mr Speaker:** Very, very brief questions because we cannot keep people waiting indefinitely.

**Vicky Foxcroft (Lewisham, Deptford) (Lab):** Scotland had a 10-year strategy to develop a public health approach to tackle violence, although people in Scotland would argue that it should have been a 15 or 20-year strategy. Will the Government show us how serious they are about taking a public health approach to this issue by committing to a 20-year strategy from the start?

**Sajid Javid:** Earlier I mentioned the consultation, which—to correct the record—closed at the end of May. I hope that the hon. Lady will input into that consultation. If she has made that suggestion to the Government, we will be taking it very seriously.

**Several hon. Members rose**—

**Mr Speaker:** I do not want to spawn intra-family discord. We have heard a voice from Lewisham, so we have to hear a voice from Leyton, I call John Cryer.

**John Cryer (Leyton and Wanstead) (Lab):** Thank you, Mr Speaker.
Further to Question 7, it is widely known that fire crewing per pump has been cut across the country from five to four, and even from four to three. Although we all know that this is an operational matter, is not the safety of firefighters a ministerial matter as well?

Mr Hurd: The safety of firefighters is of huge interest to Ministers, and it is something that we do keep an eye on, but the hon. Gentleman is right in his fundamental point: these operating decisions are best taken locally. [Interruption.] He makes a face, but we cannot have a Minister sitting here and making judgments on what is right when it comes to allocating resources to risk in Cleveland, Cumbria or anywhere else.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: I am sorry to disappoint colleagues, but we have time for only one more question. I call Alison Thewliss.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): Thank you, Mr Speaker.

My constituent, Eryaar Popalzai, came to the UK from Afghanistan at the age of 14 some five years ago, as an unaccompanied minor asylum seeker. Since his further submissions in 2017, he has yet to hear anything from the Home Office. He is an incredibly vulnerable young man and has been getting therapy from Freedom from Torture for three years. What do I tell him when he comes to my surgery this Friday?

Caroline Nokes: I am happy to take up this specific case with the hon. Lady after questions, if she would like. One of the changes that the Home Office has made over the course of the past few weeks is to ensure that we are prioritising older cases and cases of more vulnerable asylum seekers, so that we can get through the backlog of cases and ensure that people such as her constituent get a response.
NEW MEMBER

The following Member made and subscribed the Affirmation required by law:
Lisa Forbes, for Peterborough.

Murders in Northamptonshire: Serious Case Reviews

3.40 pm

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab) (Urgent Question): To ask the Secretary of State for Education if he will make a statement on the findings of two serious case reviews into the murders of two toddlers in Northamptonshire.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Nadhim Zahawi): The deaths of Dylan in 2017 and Evelyn-Rose in 2018 were both tragic and, indeed, horrific. Separate serious case reviews were published on 5 June this year by Northamptonshire’s local safeguarding children board. The serious case reviews highlight serious weaknesses in child safeguarding practice and partnership arrangements at those times, and together make 16 recommendations for Northamptonshire and its safeguarding partners to implement.

These events have highlighted the serious systemic issues in Northamptonshire. I want to assure the House that we have already begun taking action. Since those deaths, and following an Ofsted focused visit in 2018 that exposed a more general decline in the quality of services, my Department has appointed a highly experienced commissioner, Malcolm Newsam CBE, to ensure that improvements take place, and has increased improvement support from Lincolnshire County Council—one of the best in the country for children’s social care. The commissioner has already identified six priority areas for significant improvement to effectively improve outcomes for children. He has identified the importance of learning from the tragic deaths of these two young children and others. I have written to Malcolm today to ask that he continue to put learning from Dylan and Evelyn-Rose’s deaths and the recommendations from these reviews firmly into his future work.

I have already set out my intention, on the recommendation of the commissioner, to create an operationally independent children’s service trust serving Northamptonshire to drive improvement in services. I can announce to the House today that I have issued a statutory direction to the council to work with the commissioner on the creation of that trust by July 2020.

Andrew Gwynne: Thank you, Mr Speaker, for granting this urgent question on these horrific and tragic cases. I thank the Minister for his heartfelt response. I also thank the shadow Leader of the House, my hon. Friend the Member for Walsall South (Valerie Vaz), for highlighting this issue to the Government during business questions last Thursday.

Last week, two serious case reviews were published in Northamptonshire on the deaths of these two toddlers. Both these very young children were systematically let down by the local authority, Northamptonshire County Council—an institution that was supposedly there to protect them. The reports examined the deaths of Dylan Tiffin-Brown, aged two, when he died of a cardiac failure after his father assaulted him in December 2017, and Evelyn-Rose Muggleton, aged one, when she died in hospital days after being assaulted by her mother’s partner in April 2018.

I hope that we will now see—I believe that we will—Ministers use everything in their power to ensure that this public institution does not fail children again and to prevent other tragedies from happening elsewhere.
I note that a serious case review into the death of a child remains confidential. The review looked into the case of a boy from Northampton who was locked in a room, beaten and abused. The parents were charged for neglect last month, with professionals describing it as the worst case of child cruelty that they had seen in 25 years.

The two published reviews highlight key misjudgements from staff about the level of danger posed by the men to the two children and failures to act on warnings that the children were at risk. Northamptonshire safeguarding children board said that there were “lost opportunities” leading up to the murders and that the two children’s safety was “seriously undermined” after the significance of the killers’ criminal past and history of domestic abuse was overlooked by agencies.

Dylan died aged two after sustaining 39 injuries to his face, neck, torso and limbs, including 15 rib fractures and lacerations to his liver. After a sustained beating at home by his father—a drug dealer from Northampton who was convicted of murder in October 2018—a post-mortem found cocaine, heroin and cannabis in the twomonths’ body at the time of death. No social worker saw Dylan in the two months between his being discovered at his father’s home during a police drugs raid and his death at his father’s hands.

Evelyn-Rose, aged one, died three days after sustaining a traumatic brain injury from her mother’s partner. She had received multiple bruising and bleeding injuries, including damage to her spine and both eyes. Social care and health agencies that had been involved with the family had failed to recognise the neglect that was taking place. The safeguarding children board stated that two social workers had been allocated to the case, but that the case had started to “drift, with little if any attention being paid to the children’s welfare”.

Sadly, Northamptonshire’s children’s services have been on the radar since the severe financial troubles at the county council overwhelmed the local authority. The county’s children’s services were said to have “substantially declined” when inspectors were called in during last October’s visit and that a “fundamental shift” in culture was required—something that the Minister acknowledges. Given that, can he assure the House that the financial problems at Northamptonshire are not further jeopardising or worsening the provision of children’s services across the county? If he finds that they are, what representations will he make to Ministers in the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, to ensure that Northamptonshire has the resources it needs? Is he assured—

Mr Speaker: Order. I am loth to interrupt, because the hon. Gentleman is treating of a matter of the utmost gravity, and I respect that, but I am afraid he has taken two and a half times his allotted time. I feel sure that he is reaching his peroration, which will be of formidable eloquence and brief.

Andrew Gwynne: Thank you, Mr Speaker. These are very serious matters. Is the Minister assured that the authority is able to finance improvements to children’s services both now and during the reorganisation, including the transfer to the trust that he mentioned, and to implement the improvements needed to put right these severe service failings? Lastly, will he intervene and ensure full transparency on the third serious case review, which remains unpublished? This matter is so severe and so serious that every opportunity must now be taken to act.

Nadhim Zahawi: Let me take the last point first, about the third serious case review. Our statutory guidance is clear that local safeguarding children boards must let the independent Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel—the panel, as I will refer to it—and the Department for Education and Ofsted know of any decisions about a serious case review initiation and publication, including the name of any reviewer commissioned, as soon as they have made a final decision. The local safeguarding children board should also set out for the panel and the Secretary of State the justification for any decisions not to initiate or publish a serious case review. They should send copies of all serious case reviews to the panel, the DFE and Ofsted at least seven working days before publication.

There has been and continues to be a great deal of debate about the transparency of the child protection system in England, but there is a presumption that all serious case review reports are published. That is why local safeguarding “partnerships are required to send copies of all serious case reviews to the panel, the DFE and Ofsted within at least seven days, as I have mentioned. At that point, they would need to provide justification for any decision not to publish the report. The panel has not yet received the draft serious case review in relation to child JL.1 Once the draft serious case review is received, the panel will consider carefully if there is any justification for not publishing the report. I hope that reassures the hon. Gentleman.

On our work with the MHCLG, the hon. Gentleman can see that my colleague the Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government, my hon. Friend the Member for Richmond (Yorks) (Rishi Sunak), is on the Front Bench, and we take our work together very seriously. We are working towards the spending review and making sure that funding for children’s services is adequate. Overall, if we look at England, local authorities have made some tough decisions, but they have actually protected the funding for children’s services. I can give the hon. Gentleman the reassurance that working with Malcolm Newsam, with the recommendations he has made for me and the trust that we will be delivering for all Northamptonshire’s children, will be the best way forward.

Chris Heaton-Harris (Daventry) (Con): I thank the Minister and, indeed, the Opposition spokesman, the hon. Member for Denton and Reddish (Andrew Gwynne), for the way they have treated this matter in the House today.

It is with great sadness and a sense of shock that I and others have read these serious case reviews. I have been here since 2010 and, unfortunately, throughout that time I have been raising concerns and cases with the local authority—Northampton’s children’s social services—that have caused me great concern. I am going to see Malcolm Newsam, whose appointment as the Government-appointed children’s commissioner I really do welcome, next week to discuss a number of current cases that I have. Throughout the various reviews and reports we have had on these issues, a serious lack

of challenge and reporting has been highlighted in every single one. Can my hon. Friend explain to my constituents why these lessons have yet not been learned?

Nadhim Zahawi: My hon. Friend raises a very powerful point. All I can say to him is that my Department triggered our intervention powers immediately when those concerns in relation to children’s services were raised with me. I hope that, after his meeting with Malcolm Newsam, he will be reassured that we have the right commissioner in there. We are taking those steps, and I have mentioned the direction I have made to the local authority.

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): It is impossible not to be moved by these stories. As the saying goes, it takes a community not just to raise, but to protect a child. Surely, early intervention must also be at the heart of all these stories. In Oxfordshire, over 30 children’s centres used to exist; now there are just eight hubs, many of which are far too far away from the most deprived communities. Given how important these centres are and the fact that groups such as Abingdon Carousel have needed to raise funds from county and town councils to keep centres open for a very limited period, will the Minister robustly make the case in the upcoming spending review for why children’s centres are so important to prevent children from getting into this situation?

Nadhim Zahawi: The hon. Lady raises the issue of children’s centres. I hope that she would commend the troubled families programme, which has reduced by a third the number of children needing to be taken into care. We have announced the strengthening families programme, in which we are scaling up the whole-system approach to children’s services and childcare from Leeds, North Yorkshire and Hertfordshire and investing £84 million to scale that up to another 20 local authorities. They have made it very clear to me that very much part of that whole-system approach is the troubled families programme work that they do.

The hon. Lady also mentioned children’s centres. I am looking at how local authorities make best use of their infrastructure, including children’s centres. Local government—local authorities, local leaders—is best placed to decide how it does that. Staffordshire, which chose to close more than 60 children’s centres, but keep 14 in the areas most promising for reaching the most difficult-to-reach families, has delivered much better outcomes because it has used that resource. It has not taken it away; it has used it for outreach, to go and knock on the doors of families who would never think of coming into a building run by a local authority. There are different models, but we are looking to learn from the best models, including some of the family hubs in places such as Westminster.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): I thank the shadow Minister for requesting this urgent question and you, Mr Speaker, for granting it. These are among the most serious issues that anyone in this House could discuss. Evelyn-Rose Muggleton was just one when she was murdered by her mother’s partner. She died in hospital. Evelyn-Rose and her siblings were well known to the local hospital, the local GP and other services, and this clearly was a family in urgent need of assistance from the local authority. Sadly that was not forthcoming.

Responsibility for this must rest with Northamptonshire County Council, which has been dysfunctional for many years, but particularly in children’s social services. This must never happen again, and I welcome the Government’s commitment to put those services into a child’s trust. That is welcome, but the public in Northamptonshire Council will want to know who is going to take responsibility for this appalling tragedy, and I am afraid that the answer must be the local councillor in charge of children’s social services at the time. That individual now happens to be the leader of Northamptonshire County Council. He is a good man, and he is working very hard to transform the county council into the two new unitaries, but I believe, and my constituents believe, that the buck must stop with the person at the top. Will the Minister therefore join me in calling for Councillor Matt Golby to resign his position as leader of Northamptonshire County Council?

Nadhim Zahawi: I thank my hon. Friend for his question. He spoke powerfully about the injuries that these poor souls sustained and about how they were well known to other services. We legislated in the Children and Social Work Act 2017 to require local areas to establish new, much stronger multi-agency safeguarding arrangements, which I think will enhance the protective net around our most vulnerable children. That includes the police and health as statutory partners. Safeguarding partners in Northamptonshire must publish a plan setting out how they will deliver those arrangements by 29 June and must implement them by 29 September.

My Department is monitoring compliance, and we will be asking those partners to work swiftly and collectively to ensure that lessons have been learnt and implemented.

My hon. Friend will forgive me if I do not comment on the local political leadership. What I would like to see now is us moving forward with Malcolm Newsam’s recommendations and getting the trust up and running as quickly as possible.

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Denton and Reddish (Andrew Gwynne) and the Minister for their approach and their responses to this horrific example of child abuse. The connection between children’s abuse and the abuse of children are unfortunately long known, and I am afraid that I could give several similar examples from when I was national children’s officer at Women’s Aid in the 1990s. I have heard previous Ministers and previous Governments say that lessons would be learnt and action taken, yet here we still are. I therefore ask the Minister respectfully, will he work with domestic violence organisations, as well as other organisations of course, to try to really learn the lessons that should be learnt about the connections between abuse by violent men of their children and abuse of their female partners?

Nadhim Zahawi: The hon. Lady makes a powerful and well-made point. There is, if not causation, then certainly a correlation between people who abuse and hurt children and those who abuse and hurt women. I try to make sure that we learn as much as possible and that we act as quickly as possible, as I think we have in this case.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): These cases are truly harrowing and nothing will ever bring back the young children who so tragically lost their lives at the hands of those who were supposed to be caring for them. I think we are all clear, both locally in Northamptonshire and...
here in this House, that this can never, ever be allowed to happen again. What steps are being taken to ensure that best practice from other parts of the country is being learnt as a matter of urgency in Northamptonshire to overhaul its children’s services? What ongoing monitoring of those services will be taking place to give my constituents in Corby and east Northamptonshire confidence that in future we will have first class children’s services that protect the young people in their care?

Nadhim Zahawi: I am very grateful to my hon. Friend for his question. I hope he heard me say earlier that we have Malcolm Newsam. In conjunction with Malcom we have Lincolnshire County Council, which is one of our exemplars in delivering the best services and safeguarding children. The important thing to remember in this case is that we must always ensure that the safety of children comes first. We know that poor practice can cost more money, not less, in the longer term. The director of children’s services has been clear in her statements that funding was not the cause of these tragic incidents, and that system, practice and partnership was where it needs to be. The important thing is that we get on.

In Doncaster, I saw at first hand how children’s services can be transformed. They went from failing with very poor outcomes, to good outcomes for children when we put it into trust. I met the social workers on the frontline, and 70% of them are the same people who were here when it was failing. I said to them, “What is the difference here? What have you done here that has transformed the service? You are the same people who were here when it was failing.” They said it was all about leadership: leadership that supported, trusted and nurtured them, and delivered that support for them. Those are the sorts of lessons we need to learn in order to be able to deliver the same level of success as Doncaster.

Ms Angela Eagle (Wallasey) (Lab): Funding may not have had a direct effect, but surely the Minister needs to recognise that, with the huge cuts to local authorities and a national shortage of well-qualified social workers putting enormous pressure on social services systems around the country, we are seeing a crisis in one area responded to by putting in extra money and bidding up social workers’ wages, allowing them to move to solve one problem but creating gaps in other areas. Surely the Minister needs to take a much more systemic view of what is going on in social services up and down the country, and recognise that funding is an issue.

Nadhim Zahawi: I think—I hope—I have been clear in saying that I recognise there are funding pressures on children’s services. I am working with the director of children’s services and the sector as a whole in preparation for the spending review. However, to simply characterise this as a funding issue would be misleading. We have to do both things. We have to have a whole-system approach. We are learning from the best—Leeds, North Yorkshire and Hertfordshire—and scaling those models from those three local authorities to 20. We also have to look at the workforce, and by introducing the national accreditation assessment process and Social Work England we begin to deliver a system that really does work to protect the most vulnerable children and families in our society.

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): I speak as a former Minister who changed the rules so that SCRs are published. The regulations are clear that if publication would compromise the welfare of a surviving child or sibling, they should be kept confidential. From reading these serious case reviews, I feel that there is a profound sense of déjà vu when they talk about the lack of joined-up working and the lack of information, showing lost opportunities. Last year, the Minister announced that he was going to change serious case reviews and the local safeguarding children’s boards who commission them. They will be replaced by team safeguarding partners, which consist of local authorities, clinical commissioning groups and the police. The only agency that seems to have rung the alarm bells in this case was the schools attended by the siblings of the victims. Why are schools and education not part of those essential team partners in the new format?

Nadhim Zahawi: My hon. Friend is absolutely passionate about work in this area. Schools and other local partners are involved and engaged, but the purpose of the legislation was to make sure that health, police and education work together. However, he raises an important point about how we can make sure that schools are much more involved.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): I am not attacking the Minister, but for years, his predecessors have come to the Dispatch Box and said, “We are going to learn the lessons. It’s not going to happen again.” Some years ago, I took a delegation to meet one of his predecessors and we were assured that resources would be available, but we are back at square one today, and I feel very sorry about what has happened to these kids in Northampton, as much as I do about some of the things that have happened to kids in Coventry. The Minister really has to get a grip on this now. It is no good talking about good practice in one authority as opposed to another. He has to face up to it: there is a shortage of social workers and a lack of resources in local government.

Nadhim Zahawi: I am very grateful to the hon. Gentleman for at least not blaming this Minister, but nevertheless, he raises a very important point. One of our innovations is the introduction of a national panel, chaired by Edward Timpson, which has a remit to make sure that nationally we learn the lessons from such terrible cases. For the first time, it will undertake national reviews. The first of those reviews will be on the criminal exploitation of children, so we are learning the lessons and putting the infrastructure in place to be able to do that and act upon it.

Andrew Lewer (Northampton South) (Con): I have met Malcolm Newsam several times and will do so again shortly. I have a lot of confidence in him. The proposed children’s trust model seems like the right way forward and particularly the “children first” focus and the focus on the child rather than necessarily on the mother or other carers involved. We have heard about the role of the community from the hon. Member for Oxford West and Abingdon (Layla Moran). While the children’s trust model is welcome in many places, will the Minister provide assurances that local democratic oversight will continue to be involved in it?
Nadhim Zahawi: It is very important that there is local democratic oversight. When I look at the areas that deliver the best outcomes and best practice, I see that it is a combination of very strong leadership at local authority level—so, the officer class—and strong political leadership, including from councillors who really understand their remit to protect children.

Matt Rodda (Reading East) (Lab): This is a deeply harrowing case and I appreciate the Minister’s focus on leadership; he is absolutely right about that. I hope that he can also see the connection between leadership and properly funded services. Surely it is very difficult for even the best leaders to lead adequately if they have an insufficient supply of skilled staff.

Nadhim Zahawi: The hon. Gentleman raises an important point overall about funding and the challenge of funding for children’s services. In this case, it is also important for us to understand the detail. Sally Hodges, the director of children’s services, told the Local Government Chronicle:

“It was because of the failure of a number of people through the whole system in respect of risk to those children. I don’t think financial matters had a direct impact.”

The hon. Gentleman raises an important point overall, but in this tragic case, it is not about simply saying that the money was not there.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): Northamptonshire had the most expensive children’s services in the country, so funding wasn’t the issue, was it?

Nadhim Zahawi: I am grateful for that powerful intervention by my right hon. Friend. As he rightly says, it is not simply about funding; the issue is much more fundamental in Northamptonshire, which is why we have made the right decision in taking it into trust.

Hong Kong

4.9 pm

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab) (Urgent Question): To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the impact of the Hong Kong extradition law on the Sino-British joint declaration.

The Minister for Asia and the Pacific (Mark Field): The UK Government remain acutely aware of our enduring responsibility towards Hong Kong as one of the joint signatories to the 1984 joint declaration that established the principle of “one country, two systems”. This principle, underpinned by the common law system, provides Hong Kong with the foundations for its continued success as a truly global financial centre and prosperous world city.

Let me turn to the current issues around the ramifications of the Hong Kong Government’s contentious proposals to change their extradition laws. Yesterday’s huge protest march—peaceful right up until the end—was a clear demonstration of the strength of feeling in Hong Kong. Hong Kong’s Chief Executive, Carrie Lam, has insisted that new legislation is needed to close a loophole that has prevented a Hong Kong national accused of murdering another Hong Kong national in Taiwan from facing justice, yet the Taiwanese Administration also oppose the changes, while civil society and business and legal groups in Hong Kong have expressed the strongest concerns about the content of the proposals and the very short consultation period.

Many fear above all that Hong Kong nationals and residents risk being pulled into China’s legal system, which can involve lengthy pre-trial detentions, televised confessions and an absence of many of the judicial safeguards that we see in Hong Kong and in the UK. While we welcome recent efforts by the Hong Kong Government to react to the unprecedented level of public concern—of the 7 million people living in Hong Kong, between 300,000 and 1 million were on the streets yesterday—the Foreign and Commonwealth Office is clear that the changes proposed fail to address fully some core issues that we and others have raised.

The UK Government have been unequivocal in their views. From the outset, the consul general, Andy Heyn, and my officials have been raising concerns with the Hong Kong Government, members of the Hong Kong Legislative Council and the Executive Council at all levels. We have also had full and detailed discussions with Chief Executive Carrie Lam, both bilaterally and as part of an EU démarche. On 30 May, the Foreign Secretary issued a joint statement with his Canadian counterpart on the potential impact of the proposals on our citizens in Hong Kong, including on business confidence and on Hong Kong’s international reputation.

Some Hong Kong lawmakers have proposed an array of alternative solutions, including that additional legally binding human rights safeguards be included in the proposed legislation. In my meeting in London on 20 May with Hong Kong Secretary for Commerce and Economic Development, Edward Yau, I made it clear that proper consideration must be given to all these suggestions as part of a wider and more comprehensive consultation. More time for consultation would allow for a more adequate consensus to be built.
As the House will be aware, the operation of the court system on mainland China is very different from that which applies in Hong Kong. There are widespread concerns that fear of extradition to China might have a chilling effect on Hong Kong’s rights and freedoms and result in increased self-censorship. We shall continue to stress to the Hong Kong and Chinese authorities that for confidence in the “one country, two systems” policy to be maintained, Hong Kong must enjoy the full measure of its high degree of autonomy and rule of law as set out in the joint declaration and enshrined in the Basic Law.

Catherine West: It is very disappointing that the Secretary of State could not make it to the Chamber for the 1 million Hong Kong residents who took to the streets yesterday to protest against their Government’s proposed extradition Bill. If enacted, the law would allow suspected criminals to be extradited to mainland China, bypassing Hong Kong’s independent legal system. Over the past few weeks, Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, the business community, civil society organisations, the Hong Kong Bar Association and the International Chamber of Commerce have all expressed deep concern that the Bill will further erode the “one country, two systems” model.

The law courts on mainland China are seen as an arm of the state. Forced confession is frequently practised and activists often fear imprisonment for crimes they have not committed. Hong Kong’s common law system is not open to such abuse, as the Minister mentioned in his introductory remarks, and although it is under pressure, the separation of powers remains more or less intact. The amendments to the extradition law would significantly compromise the firewall that separates the sharply different systems.

In recent times, we have watched with great unease as political and civic freedoms have been put under increasing strain. Those freedoms are guaranteed under the Basic Law, a core component of the Sino-British joint declaration. As the co-signatory to that treaty, which is registered at the United Nations, the Government have a legal duty to ensure that it is upheld.

The last Governor of Hong Kong, Lord Patten of Barnes, said that this Bill’s provisions were “an assault on Hong Kong’s values, stability and security. They create fear and uncertainty...at a time when we should all be working to safeguard Hong Kong’s reputation as one of the world’s greatest businesses” and cultural centres. Does the Minister agree with his colleague’s assessment, and will he outline how the Government intend to address this issue in the immediate future, alongside long-standing concerns about the erosion of democratic principles in Hong Kong?

We have a long and enduring history with Hong Kong, and we have lasting political, economic and cultural ties. As we mark the 21st anniversary of the handover next month, it is crucial for us to keep our promise that “Hong Kong will never walk alone”.

Mark Field: I thank the hon. Lady for the tone of her comments. She will be aware from discussions that we have had—and I have visited Hong Kong twice already during my time as a Minister—that we understand many of the concerns which have been raised by Lord Patten and, indeed, by her. In particular, we understand the concerns raised in the most recent six-monthly report—not without some controversy do we continue to have a six-monthly report—which states that, while we believe that one country, two systems is working well, in the sphere of civil and political freedoms Hong Kong’s high degree of autonomy is being reduced.

Let me say this in relation to the joint declaration as a whole. Three years ago, in 2016, we called on a breach of the declaration following the involuntary removal of the Causeway Bay booksellers from Hong Kong to the mainland. That was the first and, to date, the only time that we have called upon a breach. However, it is clear that these events are becoming close to breaching not just the spirit but the letter of the joint declaration. I fear that this is also a good example of tough cases making bad law. There is a potential loophole, but it is interesting to note that it is not one that the Taiwanese authorities have asked to be sorted out.

A Hong Kong national is being accused of a very serious crime—murder—and there is clearly no extradition prospect, but, as the hon. Lady rightly pointed out, this opens up a potentially much broader extradition-related concern. As I mentioned in my initial comments, one of the biggest concerns is that, particularly at a time when President Xi has a strong anti-corruption campaign in place, there is a risk that individuals could be caught up in this in a very inadvertent way. While there are proposed safeguards—it is proposed to raise the extradition level from a three-year custodial sentence to one of at least seven years—the situation none the less still raises the deep concerns to which the hon. Lady referred.

Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con): Lord Patten has said that the decision to exclude any extradition agreement between Hong Kong and mainland China in 1997 was not a loophole, but a deliberate decision that was made in order to protect the autonomy of Hong Kong and the firewall between it and China. Does the Minister agree that if countries speak with one voice in expressing concerns about this issue, there is likely to be more of an impact? What is the UK doing to join like-minded countries in expressing such concerns?

Mark Field: I thank my hon. Friend, who takes a great interest in matters to do broadly with China but also specifically with Hong Kong, and I pay tribute to her for her detailed and steadfast work in that regard. Yes, she is right: we need to work together as an international community on this. It is perhaps fair to put it on record that there are already some extradition arrangements between some countries and Hong Kong, but obviously we are deeply concerned that this particular law provides a much more general overview, particularly as it engages the Chinese mainland. But I will, if I may, reiterate what my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary and his Canadian counterpart, Christina Freeland, said as recently as 30 May:

“It is vital that extradition arrangements in Hong Kong are in line with ‘one country, two systems’ and fully respect Hong Kong’s high degree of autonomy.”

Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): Thank you for granting this urgent question, Mr Speaker. I also want to congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Hornsey and Wood Green (Catherine West) on securing it. I share her profound concern about these
extradition laws, as evidently do hundreds of thousands of Hong Kong citizens who took to the streets over the weekend. These laws constitute not just an erosion but a fundamental breach of the Sino-British declaration and the one country, two systems principle it enshrines. They threaten the judicial independence of Hong Kong.

The warning signs have been coming for several years now: we have seen an increasing crackdown on dissent and protest. Now we face the prospect of a direct line between Beijing and Hong Kong’s courts that could see Hong Kongers sent thousands of miles away to face trial in mainland China’s flawed criminal justice system.

The UK does not have an extradition treaty with China, so why have the Government done next to nothing? The joint declaration is a legally binding treaty registered with the United Nations, and the British Government are the joint guarantor with China of the rights of Hong Kong citizens. Moreover, there are 170,000 British national overseas passport holders, many of whom reside in Hong Kong.

The concessions offered by the Hong Kong Government in the last few hours have no legal force, so I have one question for the Minister: will he make every effort to persuade the Executive in Hong Kong to halt the progress of these highly dangerous extradition amendments before Wednesday’s crunch votes?

Mark Field: I thank the hon. Lady for her comments, although I think some of them are a little unkind to officials, Ministers and also more particularly our excellent consul general, Andy Heyn, who has been out in Hong Kong, as we have recognised that this issue has been emerging for quite some time. As I mentioned in my earlier comments, it is also fair to say that we have consistently, certainly in my two years as a Minister, at every six-monthly report expressed ongoing concerns about the deterioration, as we have seen it, in political and civil rights.

It is probably fair to say that these proposals—the proposed extradition law—did not originate at China’s instigation, but there is no doubt that the Hong Kong Government are now under distinct pressure from Beijing. We believe that some opportunities to climb down have been missed, but even the huge public display of defiance yesterday—as I have said, up until the last few moments it was very peaceable—combined with concerted opposition from the international business and legal communities has not been able to turn the tide.

I say to the hon. Lady that of course we will do all we can. Andy Heyn is the very able assistant Esther Blythe is back in Hong Kong, and we will do all we can to make further urgent representations to the Hong Kong Government.

This issue has highlighted that it is not the Chief Executive and not even the Legislative Council that can provide an effective check to external influence in Hong Kong; it is the presence and continuation of an independent judicial system. Obviously, again as the hon. Lady rightly alluded to, it now looks as though we are heading towards a potential pitting of the Hong Kong judicial system squarely against that of Beijing.

Stephen Crabb (Preseli Pembrokeshire) (Con): I agree with the Minister: the United Kingdom has a serious and special obligation to defend civil liberties in Hong Kong. One of the leaders of the Hong Kong pro-democracy movement said in a note last week that these new extradition amendments and this Bill will, if passed, have destructive effects on our civil liberties as well as on our economy.

Does the Minister agree with that assessment, and does he feel we are discharging our obligation to defend civil liberties in Hong Kong as fully as we can at the present time?

Mark Field: I thank the right hon. Friend for his question and I broadly agree with what has been said. I hope that the work of democracy and diplomacy will ensure that we are able to do our best not only to push back but to advise and express our deep concerns. We have only to look at the recent six-monthly reports to recognise the increasing buzz of concern on our side and indeed from many in Hong Kong in relation to this matter. In particular, the extradition treaty has engaged many in the business community, many of whom have felt broadly positive over the past 22 years. One of the messages we put to our counterparts in Beijing is that a strong Hong Kong is required for their own plans, whether on the belt and road or other economic initiatives, to be fully successful. Hong Kong’s unique legal system provides an opportunity for substantial capital markets. The great success of Hong Kong therefore relies on its high degree of autonomy being maintained.

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): I congratulate the hon. Member for Hornsey and Wood Green (Catherine West) on securing this urgent question and I thank you for granting it, Mr Speaker.

Anyone who saw last week’s remarkable documentary by Kate Adie to mark the 30th anniversary of the Tiananmen Square massacre will not need to be reminded what respect for human rights means to the Government of China. Although people will say that China has moved on since then, it has not moved on enough even to admit that Tiananmen Square happened, never mind to apologise to the relatives of all those who were killed. Most people in China do not know that the weekend’s protests in Hong Kong happened because the Chinese Government made absolutely sure that they were not allowed to know about them. That is the extent of the ongoing repression of human rights in China and we should all be concerned that a similar repression of human rights will start to be inflicted on the people of Hong Kong as well.

Normally, under an extradition treaty, a person cannot be extradited for an offence that is not a crime in the country they would be extradited from. That will not apply in these circumstances, however, because China will not respect the terms of any treaty with Hong Kong. Also, a person cannot normally be extradited to a country where they would not get a fair trial, but does anyone seriously believe that that protection would be respected for anyone in Hong Kong? I welcome some of the assurances that the Minister has given, but will he say a bit more about what action the United Kingdom is taking just now—through the United Nations, for example—to ensure that all possible international diplomatic pressure is brought to bear, not just in Hong Kong but, more importantly, in China to ensure that this law never becomes effective? Also, given that China is one of the countries that we are supposed to be looking keenly towards for a trade deal, may we have an
assurance that in no circumstances will the prospect of a trade deal allow the voice of the United Kingdom and our allies in Europe to be silenced when it comes to speaking up in defence of the rights of people to whom the United Kingdom continues to owe a legal and moral responsibility?

Mark Field: I thank the hon. Gentleman from the Scottish National party for his comments and I will try to answer his questions. It is obviously not my place as a Minister in the Foreign and Commonwealth Office to comment on the specifics of trade deals other than to say that we will continue relentlessly to express any concerns about human rights with any country with which we are looking to strike a trade deal. That said, this is a particular circumstance because of the nature of the joint declaration. The hon. Gentleman rightly suggested that that document, which was signed by China and the United Kingdom in 1984, is now lodged with the United Nations and that is clearly one mechanism by which we could try to stand up for its terms. Back in 2016, there was a particular episode in which we thought the joint declaration was being abused and, if we feel that we are not getting the changes we are looking for on this extradition law, we will use whatever means we can.

The Hong Kong Government released a statement at 11 o’clock last night, Hong Kong time, noting the people’s right to freedom of expression and assembly, but insisting that the Bill would continue to its Second Reading on Wednesday. Chief Executive Carrie Lam reiterated that message on television this morning, again Hong Kong time, and we are obviously looking to try to ensure that the safeguards put in place over the next two or three days are as watertight as possible. However, this is an ongoing discussion and I hope the hon. Gentleman will recognise that we want to leave all our options open.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): Beyond the Minister’s evident charm, what leverage do we actually have?

Mark Field: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his comments. He is absolutely right that we have significant obligations to British national (overseas) passport holders. He will be aware that the right of abode in the UK was defined by the Immigration Act 1971, so there are immigration controls to which BN(O) passport holders are subject. The rights they have are not the full rights of British citizens. None the less, they are British nationals from Hong Kong. It is something that we do take very seriously. I hope that he will forgive me if say that I will write to him in due course to try to answer his specific issues, with particular regard to any changes to the rights of such individuals since 1997.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): The Second Reading of the Bill to implement these changes will take place on Wednesday. Legislators in Hong Kong have told me today that they anticipate that, thereafter, the remaining stages of the Bill could be completed as early as the middle of the week after next. If that happens, clearly the Minister’s aspiration for more consultation will be dead in the water. What will he do then?

Mark Field: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for what he says. It would clearly be of grave concern. There is an almost universal view, and not just from those who were on the streets of Hong Kong yesterday. Increasingly, business organisations based in Hong Kong and, indeed, around the world are asking for greater consultation. I would rather not speculate as to where
we might be if the path he describes is taken over the next 10 days, and I sincerely hope that will not come to pass.

Mr Speaker, you may be aware that the right hon. Gentleman has the Adjournment debate, in which we will be covering a little of this ground. I hope he will forgive me—I will want to talk more generally later about the relations between the UK, Hong Kong and China.

Mr Speaker: I am most grateful for that public information announcement. It is potentially of interest to people observing our proceedings that this debate will indeed be resumed in the form of tonight’s Adjournment debate, under the auspices of the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael), specifically on UK foreign policy in relation to China and Hong Kong.

Moreover, I will have the great honour and privilege tomorrow night of hosting a dinner in support of Hong Kong Watch, which, to put it bluntly, is a splendid organisation that has been set up to keep an eye on what the Chinese Government are up to in relation to Hong Kong. That organisation is magnificently led on a day-to-day basis by the estimable Ben Rogers, who as I speak might well be in our midst.

Grenfell: Government Response

4.36 pm

The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (James Brokenshire): With permission, Mr Speaker, I will make a statement on the Government’s response to the Grenfell Tower fire. I am also writing to the Chair of the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee, the hon. Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts), to provide a formal report on progress, a copy of which will be placed in the Library.

First, I will take a brief moment to thank all those who responded to yesterday’s serious fire in Barking, east London. The London Borough of Barking and Dagenham provided emergency accommodation for those residents who needed it, and we will continue to work with the council to ensure that residents receive the support they need at this most difficult time.

Although the cause of the fire has yet to be confirmed, I have asked the Building Research Establishment to investigate the fire, working with the London fire brigade. I have also asked the independent expert panel on wider fire safety issues to provide urgent advice to the Government. We will take account of the findings of the investigation and of the panel’s advice in our further work on reviewing the fire safety guidance. The local authority and the building owners are reviewing fire safety for the rest of the development. I remain in close contact with the London fire brigade, and I will be visiting the community later today.

As we mark two years since the devastating events of 14 June, I know the whole House will join me in remembrance and solidarity with the people of north Kensington. I want them to know that this House is behind them in honouring the loved ones they lost, in helping those left behind to heal and rebuild their lives and in our determination to ensure that nothing like this can ever happen again.

The unprecedented disaster has been met with an unprecedented response across the Government, our public services, local government and the voluntary sector. I am hugely thankful to everyone involved, especially our emergency services and the public and voluntary sectors. In total, we have spent over £46 million of national Government funds and committed a further £55 million to help meet rehousing costs, to reimburse the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea for the Grenfell site management costs, to deliver new health and wellbeing services and to deliver improvements to the Lancaster West estate.

Over £27.8 million of the nearly £29 million raised through the generosity of the British public has also now been distributed, thanks to the Charity Commission. Those affected are also getting vital support from the NHS, with a further £50 million committed over the next five years to address long-term physical and mental health needs. To date, nearly 8,000 health screenings have been completed, including for more than 900 children, with more than 2,700 individuals, including more than 600 children, receiving or having received treatment for trauma.

We are determined to make sure those affected remain at the heart of the response to this tragedy, which is why my right hon. Friend the Member for Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner (Mr Hurd) continues to meet families regularly,
in his role as the Grenfell victims Minister. It is why the Prime Minister recently appointed two new panel members for phase 2 of the Grenfell Tower public inquiry, to make sure it has the necessary diversity of skills and experience. And it is why the community will be pivotal to decisions about the long-term future of the site, as the Government take ownership of this, to ensure that sensitivities are respected and that they are fully engaged in additional environmental checks, after concerns were raised. Testing has started, to assess any health risk, and we will ensure that all appropriate action is taken.

Clearly, one of our biggest priorities has been rehousing the 201 households who lost their homes, with the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea acquiring more than 300 homes to meet their needs and provide choice. I am pleased that all 201 households have accepted permanent or temporary homes, with 184 households in permanent accommodation and 14 in good-quality temporary homes. That represents significant progress since last year, but I am concerned that three households remain in emergency accommodation, including one in a hotel. I asked the independent Grenfell Recovery Taskforce, which was set up to ensure that the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea better supported residents and rebuilds trust, to look into this, and I have been assured that the council is taking an appropriate and sensitive approach, given the complex needs of those households, to find the right long-term solution for each of them.

A new home is undoubtedly an important step on the road to recovery, and it is vital that this is reinforced by long-term support, such as the recovery services co-designed by the council, in partnership with the community and local health partners. It is essential that we build on this collaboration, with the council listening and the community being heard. That is fundamental to laying the foundations for a new and stronger partnership between residents and those who serve them.

Central to this relationship, and indeed to so much of the work flowing from the fire, is the need to rebuild trust. Above all, that means ensuring that people are safe and feel safe in their homes. With that in mind, right hon. and hon. Members will be aware that we launched a consultation last week on proposals to implement meaningful reform to our building and fire safety regulatory systems, following the independent review led by Dame Judith Hackitt, to provide a clear focus on responsibility and accountability and to give residents a stronger voice to achieve the enduring change that is needed.

Alongside that, the Government also launched a call for evidence on the fire safety order to determine what changes may be required to strengthen it. This follows the recent launch of a new fund to expedite the remediation of buildings with unsafe aluminium composite material cladding in the private sector and protect leaseholders, adding up to a £600 million commitment from the Government to make the buildings of both the private and social sectors safe.

This builds on other significant measures we have undertaken, such as a ban on combustible cladding, a review of the building regulations fire safety guidance—or Approved Document B—and tests on non-ACM materials, to not only keep people safe now, but to fundamentally transform the way we build in the future, through legislation, yes, but, more crucially, through a change in culture. But I know that we must continue to challenge on what more needs to be done.

People living in buildings like Grenfell Tower need to trust that there can be no repeat of what happened that night—to trust that the state understands their lives and is working for them. That is why the social housing Green Paper, published last year, and the new deal it sets out for people living in social housing matter so much. My thanks go to the many residents who have engaged with us on this for their invaluable contribution. We are assessing the consultation responses and finalising our response. The deal it proposes aims to rebalance the relationship between residents and landlords, to address stigma and to ensure that homes are safe and decent. In addition to our drive, backed by billions, to boost the supply of social housing, the deal promises to renew our commitment to people in social housing, ensuring that everyone, no matter where they live, has the security, dignity and opportunities they need to build a better life.

Ultimately, that is our hope for the bereaved and survivors and for the strong, proud people of north Kensington, who have shown us the power of community. They and we will never, ever forget those who died in the most horrific circumstances. I know that the pain of loss continues as they wait for answers and to see justice done, as the police investigation and public inquiry continue their important work, but they should know that they are not alone: the Government, this House and, indeed, our whole country will always have a stake in the future of Grenfell, and I have every faith that this remarkable community, working in partnership, will move forward, rebuild and emerge even stronger. I commend this statement to the House.

4.45 pm

John Healey (Wentworth and Dearne) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for the advance copy of his statement. At the start of this, the week of the second anniversary of that truly terrible Grenfell Tower fire, above all else we remember the 72 men, women and children who lost their lives, and we re dedicate ourselves to doing everything needed to ensure that such a fire can never happen again.

The Grenfell survivors and families who are with us today will draw little comfort or confidence from the Secretary of State’s update statement. He made no new announcement and offered no new action. Earlier, he and I both spoke at the two-year Grenfell memorial event, with you, Mr Speaker, in Speaker’s House. Those survivors from Grenfell United who are still campaigning for change told us today:

“We shouldn’t be here; we should be at home, rebuilding our lives”.

They said that in two years:

“Little has changed and justice still seems so far off”.

There has been over these two long years some progress, which we welcome and for which individual Members and Ministers, including the Secretary of State, deserve some credit, but a national disaster on the scale of Grenfell Tower requires a national response on the same scale from the Government. That has not happened.

Ministers have been frozen like rabbits in the headlights. Their action has been too slow and too weak on every front. There has been the failure to rehouse survivors,
despite the promise that every victim of the fire would have a new permanent home within one year. There has been a failure to give justice to the Grenfell community: despite the fact that matters to all of us, which is why the taskforce continues to challenge and to support us to ensure that that happens.

The right hon. Gentleman highlighted the issue of the remediation of ACM cladding as well. He will know well the frustration that I have had with the private sector, which has not done the job that it should have done. Some responsibility can be placed very firmly there, which is why we have provided an additional £200 million for the very purpose of speeding up the process so that blocks are remediated and made safe. Progress is certainly being made. If we look at the remediation in the social sector, we can see that good progress has been made there. At the end of April, remediation had started or been completed on 87% of the 158 social sector buildings, with plans in place for the remainder. We are obviously seeing some progress in relation to the private sector.

The right hon. Gentleman highlighted the issue of local authorities and their need to see that enforcement is in place. I agree with him. That is why we are backing local authorities to take enforcement action where building owners are refusing to remediate high-rise buildings with unsafe cladding. This will include financial support, where that is necessary, for the local authority to carry out emergency remedial works. Where emergency financial support is made available, the relevant local authority will recover the costs from the building owner. Of course, we want to see this work completed as rapidly as possible, and I understand his desire to see some form of hard stop—some sort of certainty in relation to this.

I say to him that some of the required work is extensive and complicated, and, indeed, that other issues, or other areas of work, may be highlighted in respect of individual buildings, but it is right that we continue to press on and take action.

Let me underline the actions that we have taken. We launched a consultation last week on proposals to implement meaningful reform to our building safety and fire regulatory systems following the independent review led by Dame Judith Hackitt, with the intent to bring forward legislation later this year, in the next Session. We want to get this reform on to the statute book and make it happen. We have taken steps with the ban on combustible cladding. We have taken steps to see that action is advanced and that buildings are made safe, and, indeed, we have taken steps with the remediation programme that is in place. Yes, there is absolutely more work to be done, and I do not shrink from that. I do not shrink from the challenge presented by the right hon. Gentleman or others across the House. I assure him and the community of our resolute determination to make that change so that people can feel—and are—safe, and to provide that lasting legacy to all those who died in the fire.

Nigel Huddleston (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): Thank you, Mr Speaker, for opening your State Rooms today so that hon. Members could meet many of the survivors of Grenfell. I share the frustration expressed to me by many survivors today that, two years on, not enough progress has been made. I appeal to the Secretary of State to put his foot on the accelerator and move forward more quickly. I speak as a representative of an area of the country that has no tower blocks, but immediately

James Brokenshire: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his contribution and for the important points he has made to the House this afternoon. Indeed, Mr Speaker, may I also thank you for allowing your State Rooms to be used this lunchtime to enable survivors, the bereaved and others to come together to share their very powerful and important experiences and to underline to us very clearly why this matters so much and why we must be resolute in the actions that we take?

The right hon. Gentleman also highlighted the work of so many who have campaigned on this matter. We note today the role of Grenfell United, and I appreciate and recognise the huge contribution that it has made. He is right to say that, no, its representatives should not be here. I commend them for the challenge and the very effective way in which they have underlined the needs of their community. I will certainly continue to work with them and bring about the change that I think is needed.

The right hon. Gentleman raised a number of important points. On rehousing, we remain deeply concerned about the three individuals—the three households—who are still in emergency accommodation. I can underline the fact that each household has a property reserved for it. Sensitivity is needed in undertaking this work, but we will continue to support and to challenge until all residents have a long-term home in place, because that is what matters to all of us, which is why the taskforce continues to challenge and to support us to ensure that that happens.
after the fire and the tragedy my constituents told me that the Government are expected to do everything and anything they can to protect and support the victims, and to ensure that such a tragedy never happens again. I am not sure that we are moving quickly enough. I know that we are saying the right things, that we want to do the right things, and that we want be disciplined and respectful regarding the process, but may I appeal to the Secretary of State to move forward more quickly? By doing so, he will get my support and that of my constituents.

James Brokenshire: Absolutely. It is important—especially in the remediation of this highest-risk ACM cladding—that we make as speedy progress as possible. We intend to attach conditions to the funds being made available to the private sector, for example, to show that this is able to progress quickly. Indeed, we have already written to all relevant building owners to set some expectations and outline things that they need to have in place, so that we do not lose time. What needs to happen could not be more fundamental, which is why I took the step to ban combustible materials on the external walls of residential high-rise buildings and other high-risk buildings. There is a firm commitment to seeing that that action is taken.

Alison Thewlis (Glasgow Central) (SNP): Thank you, Mr Speaker, for hosting Grenfell United in Speaker’s House this afternoon. It gave us all a very good opportunity to listen to the testimonies of those affected by this awful tragedy. My thoughts are also with those affected by the fire in Barking. This really highlights how much still needs to be done to ensure that people can trust that their homes are safe to live in. There are clearly echoes of Grenfell in the case of Barking; people had flagged time and again that there were issues with their property, but they were not listened to. What is the Minister going to do to ensure that those who raise similar concerns are actually listened to and that action is taken?

I have with me the parliamentary briefing produced by Grenfell United, whose demands are absolutely reasonable. The things that these people are asking for are not, by any manner of means, things the Government cannot deliver should they have the will to do so. Will the Minister look at the demand for: “A new, separate, ‘consumer protection’ regulator to protect tenants, to change the culture of social housing across the country”, particularly as Scotland has had the Scottish Housing Regulator since 2011? In Scotland, the regulator provides a very useful means for tenants and residents to flag issues about their housing, to ensure that investigations take place and to see that action is taken, and this can make a real difference to people. If such a regulator had existed in England, it would have provided the means for residents to have their concerns heard.

Grenfell United also asks for: “Immediate removal of dangerous cladding...Improved fire safety regime...an extension of the Freedom of Information Act to cover TMOs and housing associations...Public Authority (Accountability) Bill...justice and change...For our community to be listened to.”

It is on that last request that I want to finish. Karim spoke movingly at the event in Speaker’s House earlier, saying, “We’re not going anywhere until people are safe in their homes and you treat them with respect.” Both those things must be fulfilled for the people of Grenfell to feel as though any kind of resolution is going to come from this.

James Brokenshire: I agree with a great deal of what the hon. Lady said. Yes, this is about that sense of justice and change. Clearly, there is an ongoing police inquiry that we must let take its course, and, of course, the work of the independent inquiry itself. The point about residents being listened to and respect being shown is very powerful and very important, and it will require culture change in so many ways. That process has started, but I know there is more work that needs to be done.

The hon. Lady highlights the issue of the social housing regulator—something that is of keen importance and is a key aspect of the social housing Green Paper. I am very clear, from the responses I have seen to the representations on that, that we need a much stronger response in terms of not just listening to tenants but acting on their concerns. That is the point. It is not just about trying to put something in place for the sake of it; it is about seeing that where complaints are made over building safety—there are separate regulations and issues that will come through from the implementation and the Hackitt review—there is a speedy process to see that things are done and remedied. That, for me, is and will be the test on all of this.

Of course we will keep in contact with the Scottish Government. I am open-minded as to where we can take learning, and apply and use lessons, on a two-way basis. There is good communication between my officials and officials in the Scottish Government as well. Therefore, we will learn the lessons, but equally, very firmly, make that difference.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): Two years on, what agencies are, hopefully, working together among the residents, particularly the children, in support of them?

James Brokenshire: A number of agencies are working with the community. One of the issues that I have been very concerned about is mental health support. My right hon. Friend will have heard about the additional support and funding that is being provided in that regard. There are some amazing community leaders; I have had the privilege to meet them and to see the work they are doing and the difference they are making. The council clearly has a key role to play in terms of its recovery programme and how it is putting in place these further steps. That stance of working with the community and building trust will take time, but it is an essential element if we are to move on and make the progress we need.

Emma Dent Coad (Kensington) (Lab): The time for platitudes is done. I am, frankly, shocked that Government Members have the face to wear a green heart—shame on them. How can they sleep at night when tens of thousands across the country cannot, living in homes that are potentially dangerous or with their investments worth nothing? I cannot sleep. Where is the leadership in this process? There is a whole generation of potentially unsafe buildings out there. It is hardly controversial to keep people safe in their homes. The Secretary of State talked about it being his mission. Please do not make it
a mission—make it a legacy. It is within your power, and instead you consult, report, review; consult, report, review. Please, wake up from your torpor and legislate now; we know what needs to be done.

James Brokenshire: I recognise the passion of the hon. Lady and the way in which she has sought, very firmly and very effectively, to represent her constituents. I know that that passion and the real desire to see change quickly is keenly felt. There is a weight of responsibility that all of us in Government hold in respect of this. I do take that hugely seriously in seeing how we can speed up and make the progress that we need to in relation to building safety and to breaking some of the culture and stigma issues, too. That is why we have taken the series of actions that I outlined in my statement to see that we get on and get the regulations in place. It is also why I am determined that we fix what is a broken regulatory system, and why the final step of that is the consultation that we have just launched. I encourage her to engage formally and properly on that so that we get the legislation right. But equally, we are determined to see that we speed up the process, with the private sector, on getting the buildings remediated—she is right to challenge firmly on this—and that is what we are intent on doing.

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): The thoughts of the people of Stafford are very much with the Grenfell community and all those who have suffered in this appalling tragedy. I repeat the need for the review to result in action. Has my right hon. Friend considered how to do, so that we get the legislation right. We are consulting on key elements of the new building regulation regime, so that we are in a position to legislate. He is right to talk about learning from experience elsewhere. That is what we are determined to do, so that we see a difference. As Members have said, this is about people’s lives and seeing change happening. It is not about dry reports or doing consultations; it is about seeing change come into effect, and that is what I am resolutely determined to do.

Mr David Lammy (Tottenham) (Lab): I am grateful for the Secretary of State’s statement, but he made no real or meaningful reference to the means of justice for the Grenfell families and the bereaved. That justice is delivered by two things. The first is the public inquiry. Can he say more about the delays that seem to be dogging the inquiry and the frustrations of the families and their lawyers in participating fully in it? The second is the police investigation. Can the police update us on it, if he cannot? Many here believe that there is culpability, which must one day be found in court.

James Brokenshire: The right hon. Gentleman makes a powerful point in his customary way. I know how much he has rightly challenged and been engaged in this issue. He may be aware that Metropolitan Police Service detectives investigating the Grenfell Tower fire have conducted 13 interviews under caution. That provides part of the criminal investigation into the fire, and Scotland Yard says that more interviews are being scheduled. This is clearly an ongoing investigation, with the police examining closely and assembling all relevant evidence, and it is right that we allow it to take its course.

The right hon. Gentleman highlighted the timetable of the public inquiry. It has been announced that the phase 1 report will be delayed until October this year. It is obviously an independent inquiry and process. The extension is to allow the inquiry to look thoroughly at the significant volume of evidence, and to allow time for what is known as a rule 13 process, which requires warning letters to be sent to individuals or organisations who may be subject to criticism. That is the process of the inquiry, which is independent of Government. It is for the inquiry to set out its timeline and needs.

Lucy Powell (Manchester Central) (Lab/Co-op): Thank you, Mr Speaker, for hosting Grenfell United today. I hope you will continue that tradition.

I have hundreds, if not thousands, of constituents living in dangerous or potentially dangerous high-rise buildings. While I welcome the Government’s cladding fund for private blocks, many of those blocks are still waiting to hear from the Government whether they will be eligible for that fund. Meanwhile, their residents are trapped in dangerous properties, with their lives completely on hold as they wait for that information. The fund does not cover many buildings in my constituency that have other cladding—not ACM cladding—or that have no firebreaks or other safety concerns. Residents in Skyline Central 1 face demands of up to £25,000 each to re-clad their building, and those in Burton Place face demands of up to £80,000 each. Those costs will not, as it stands, be covered by the fund. As there are a very high number of private blocks in my constituency, will the Secretary of State come to Manchester to meet some of these residents and talk about how we can make their lives safe and free them from the trap they are in, with properties that they cannot sell and are frightened to live in?

James Brokenshire: I can say to the hon. Lady that I have been to Manchester and met some residents previously in relation to this very serious issue and the profound impact this has on people’s lives. It was why I did make the decision to commit to fully fund the remediation of private sector high-rise residential buildings with ACM, except where a warranty claim has been accepted.

The hon. Lady rightly says there is a need for certainty as quickly as possible. That is why we did write to all relevant building owners on 17 May to set out the initial steps, the documentation and all the aspects, so that we are able to move quickly on making decisions in relation to this. The point about non-ACM is also very relevant, and it is why we are undertaking the relevant steps that we are with the different testing and, indeed, the advice and guidance that were being provided. I am certainly happy to talk to her and other colleagues about the impact, which I know is significant in a number of different ways, and about support for local authorities or what other action can be taken to assist.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): It is always humbling to meet the Grenfell survivors, because often they want to talk about others who are in a worse...
condition than themselves or to ask what the Government are doing to prevent further tragedies in relation to cladding and other matters. Often, however, as I am sure the Secretary of State found today, if we talk to them in some depth, we find that they themselves are still suffering. After two years, despite the fact that there is an appearance of a full support structure, it often breaks down and people are being forced—or, at least, given ultimatums—to go into accommodation that is not suitable, and they do not know whom to turn to.

What advice does the Secretary of State have for me and other Members when they are confronted by survivors of that kind, and where can they go to get justice, because not in every case is that being done at the moment?

**James Brokenshire**: I would be very interested to hear any further details from the hon. Gentleman in relation to cases he is pointing to. I know the Minister for Housing has had regular surgeries with a number of the families involved about the decision process and the support they are receiving, and indeed from the taskforce itself with the challenge and the information it gives me. I would be very pleased to meet the hon. Gentleman and talk to him about those cases. He is right: it is hugely humbling to meet the survivors and the bereaved, and see the dignity and humility that they show. I think many of us who were at the Speaker’s reception earlier today will have felt that very keenly, with the profound impact it certainly had on me and I know on others in this House.

**Dame Margaret Hodge (Barking) (Lab)**: Mr Speaker, I am sorry I could not join your Speaker’s reception today, because I was with those of my constituents in Barking—on Barking riverside—who are the survivors and victims of the terrible fire that took place yesterday. I hope you will give me a little leeway in what I have to say.

The pictures on the estate are horrific. Thankfully, nobody died, but had that fire taken place at night, I think people would have died. Literally the whole building was engulfed in flames within six minutes. The residents I met have lost their homes, their possessions, children’s toys, family photos and personal mementoes, and what I came across in my meetings this morning was trauma, grief and anger.

These are early days and it is appropriate that a proper investigation takes place, but let me raise three issues with the Secretary of State that arose out of my visit this morning. First, it absolutely shocked me that the fire alarms that should have been in place and operating were not working and that there were no sprinklers in this block of flats, because they were not considered necessary. This is a block of flats that was built only seven years ago.

Secondly, timber was used, and it was used really in a decorative way. Allegedly—and this is so shocking—that timber had not been treated. What I have been told is that the regulations are such that, because the building was only a six-storey building and therefore not 18 metres or higher, there was no necessity to have that sort of regulation. That is shocking. How on earth can that be possible in this day and age?

Thirdly, I want to talk about who is responsible. When we walk on to an estate like that, there is a freeholder, a developer, a builder and subcontractors, while the developer sells on to other people and there are then leaseholders and people in buy-to-let. There are myriad people who have a role to play there, and nobody is accountable. Everybody I talked to today on that side of the fence wanted to pass the buck and pass on responsibility.

I have to say to the Secretary of State that, at the end of the day, when lives are at risk he has to be responsible, and he has to empower local authorities, through him, to take responsibility. We are talking about protecting our people—the most important duty we have as elected representatives. It is no good passing the buck to other authorities. I hear what the Secretary of State says, and he does talk a lot of words. I urge him to recognise that now is the time for action. Two years on from Grenfell, we should not have had another fire.

**James Brokenshire**: I thank the right hon. Lady for what she has said and the points that she has made on behalf of her constituents. I do not know whether she heard it, but I indicated at the start of my statement that I would be visiting Barking today, and I am liable to be there tomorrow. Certainly, I would like to speak to her after the formalities here today, to co-ordinate and to hear some of the feedback that she has represented on the Floor of the House this afternoon.

There are two elements that the right hon. Lady highlighted to do with fire alarms and the nature of the timber used on the balconies. This is still subject to investigation and review of precisely what went on, but I can assure her that I have asked the Building Research Establishment to provide technical expertise on investigating the reasons for the speed of the fire’s spread. The expert panel will be asked to issue further guidance urgently, and the wider circumstances will be looked at in our review of wider building safety. She makes the point powerfully about responsibility—having one person clearly responsible for the management and safety of a building—which is at the heart of Judith Hackitt’s review. That is precisely what is at the heart of the reforms, and I look forward to continuing the discussion with the right hon. Lady.

**Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD)**: The Secretary of State has been asked on a number of occasions whether he would be willing to name and shame private landlords who do not take the action necessary. Will he confirm whether he is willing to do that, and if so when, to put pressure on them to take action and make that unnecessary? Secondly, I do not want him to comment on the legal case being launched by the Grenfell survivors against Arconic, Celotex and Whirlpool in the US, but what role, if any, does he see the Government playing in relation to that case?

**James Brokenshire**: On the latter point, I have only seen some of the press reporting on that litigation, so it is difficult for me to comment, not knowing at this point the detail and nature of the litigation that is contemplated. The right hon. Gentleman highlights the issue of responsibility. We have clearly set out those who have acted in a responsible way and underlined quite starkly those who have met their obligations. Clearly, those who have not are still subject to further work from local authorities. I have stressed again the enforcement powers
available and the way in which we are supporting local councils in doing that, but the key thing is that we get on with this work and make those buildings safe.

**Thangam Debbonaire** (Bristol West) (Lab): When in 2014 the all-party parliamentary fire safety rescue group asked the then local government Minister in the coalition Government to act on the coroner’s recommendations, published in 2013, after the six deaths in the Lakanal House fire in 2009, that Minister said that he had not heard anything to suggest that the changes were urgent. After the all-party group said that it would go public on his inaction if there was ever another major fire tragedy, he finally announced a review just before the 2015 general election, in which he lost his seat. He has since said that the incoming 2015 Government dropped his pledge. Maybe he is wrong, so is the Secretary of State completely certain now, 10 years after the Lakanal House fire—not just two years since Grenfell—that every recommendation that the coroner made has been implemented? If not, why not?

**James Brokenshire**: The hon. Lady has made various statements in respect of what did or did not happen at that time. It is precisely those elements that are part of phase 2 of the public inquiry, and it is right that there should be that proper scrutiny and investigation. Phase 1 is about what happened on the night, phase 2 is about the broader issues, and that inquiry will provide the scrutiny and detailed challenge that I think she is looking for.

**Matt Rodda** (Reading East) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for his update. Two years is a very long time. I can only imagine the suffering and stress that the residents of Grenfell and the local community have had to endure in that time. Many other residents around the country, such as those in Reading living in flats with dangerous cladding, have also endured suffering and stress. Will the Secretary of State now commit to take urgent action? Will he visit Reading to see the flats in my constituency that are covered in dangerous cladding, as well as other buildings that may be dangerous, such as overcrowded houses in multiple occupation and shoddy conversions of office accommodation into flats?

**James Brokenshire**: On the last point, the hon. Gentleman may be aware that we are conducting an examination of some of the evidence around office-to-residential conversions. The point he makes is one that I have heard, which is why we are pursuing the issue further. He makes various other points about his constituents and residents. If there are particular points he wishes to make to me, my ministerial colleagues and I stand ready to respond to him. His call for action is one that I hear and will respond to.

**Marsha De Cordova** (Battersea) (Lab): Two years on from the Grenfell fire, thousands of people are still living in homes wrapped in unsafe, dangerous cladding. My constituents are living with unnecessary stress, anxiety and worry due to the unsafe cladding on their blocks. The Secretary of State says that the funding has now been made available for those living in privately owned blocks, but there is no deadline or timeline set for the removal of the unsafe cladding. Will the Secretary of State today confirm what timeline is being set, not just for local authorities but for the owners of private blocks, to ensure that unsafe cladding is removed more quickly?

**James Brokenshire**: As I indicated in a previous answer, we intend to make it a condition of the funding that there is a clear timeline and that actions are shown to be taken in terms of the work that is needed. It is not that there is a lack of intent or urgency, but some of the works required are highly complex and it is therefore difficult to set a hard deadline in the way the hon. Lady wants. However, her call for action and urgency is one that I hear loud and clear. That is the way in which we intend to operate the fund.

**Chris Ruane** (Vale of Clwyd) (Lab): Ann Jones, my colleague who represents the Vale of Clwyd in the Welsh Assembly, has sponsored legislation in Wales to introduce sprinklers to prevent such fires. In response to the hon. Member for Stafford (Jeremy Lefroy), the Secretary of State said that he will look all over Europe for best practice on fire prevention. Will he look at this best practice from Wales and see if he can introduce it?

**James Brokenshire**: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Wales, who is on the Government Front Bench, indicates that that proposed legislation may not be taken forward by the Welsh Government. On the hon. Gentleman’s broader point on the assessment of the utility and use of sprinklers, we need to look very carefully at the evidence. As part of the review of the current building regulations, we are doing precisely that. There are already obligations in England for new build blocks above 30 metres in height to have sprinklers. We are looking at what is known as Approved Document B, which is a technical document that deals with building regulations, so we can better assess the evidence for sprinklers being used in new buildings.
Ford in Bridgend

5.23 pm

The Secretary of State for Wales (Alun Cairns): With your permission, Mr Speaker, I would like to make a statement about the future of Ford’s engine plant in Bridgend, south Wales.

On Thursday, Ford announced the start of a consultation with its unions concerning the potential closure of the Ford Bridgend engine plant in south Wales. I am not going to underestimate what a bitter blow this is to the 1,700 skilled and dedicated workers at Ford in Bridgend and their families, to the many more people and businesses who supply the plant, and to the town of Bridgend and the wider community. Our focus will be on working with Ford and the unions to understand the challenges and opportunities and to gain the best possible outcomes.

I have spoken with the company, the unions and colleagues across the House. Colleagues at Jobcentre Plus are standing ready to provide advice and support to people, if required.

I live close by and absolutely understand the importance of this plant to the local community. The site has been worth over £3 billion to the local economy over the last 10 years. The town of Bridgend has proudly been home for 40 years to a world-class engine manufacturing facility. Ford has relied on Bridgend and Dagenham to supply one third of its total engines worldwide—a fact held with great pride by the employees.

We have known for some time that the production of the Sigma engine was coming to its natural end and that the Jaguar Land Rover contract would not be renewed, but the news that the Dragon engine may no longer be produced in the UK is disappointing, to say the least. It is very disappointing that it could be taken out of the UK and, in fact, out of Europe, to be manufactured in Mexico. That underlines that this was not a decision about Brexit. The decision was about the challenging conditions faced right across the global automotive sector.

Bridgend has been particularly impacted by the downturn in Ford’s share of the passenger vehicle market in Europe, with volumes of the new Dragon engine falling significantly below the installed capacity at the site. Ford is restructuring its business across Europe to significantly decrease structural costs and allow for investment in future electrification. To that end, it is optimising its European manufacturing footprint and reducing operations in France, Germany and Spain. Bridgend is significantly underutilised, with projections of the number of engines that it will produce falling far below what would be commercially viable in a single plant. Bridgend also faces a significant cost disadvantage compared with other Ford facilities around the world building the same engine.

I have spoken to my right hon. Friend the Business Secretary, colleagues in the Welsh Government, the trade unions and other representatives since Ford’s announcement last week. The Business Secretary and I have spoken with local Members of Parliament, too. Together, we will continue to engage with all stakeholders and elected representatives. Although the hon. Member for Bridgend (Mrs Moon) cannot be in the Chamber today, I spoke with her on Friday.

We in the UK Government are committed to working closely with the Welsh Government and the local community to ensure that south Wales’s justified reputation as a place of industrial excellence in manufacturing and technology is maintained and expanded. On Thursday, the Welsh Government’s Minister for Economy and Infrastructure announced the establishment of a taskforce to work with partners over the difficult weeks and months ahead to find a sustainable, long-term solution for the plant and its workforce. UK Government Departments and I will play a full and active part in that body. That builds on the existing group that has been working jointly since it was confirmed that the Jaguar Land Rover engine would end in 2020. It is important that it builds on the Honda taskforce, working together to support the automotive industry in general.

We are already looking at opportunities to attract new investment to the area. I remain optimistic that south Wales is an attractive proposition and place for industry to operate from. In fact, over the last two years, I have been in Japan, China and the USA to promote the opportunities that Wales presents for the advanced manufacturing sector and our modern industrial strategy. Last year, Aston Martin announced that it will bring the production of the DBX vehicle there, which will create 750 jobs for St Athan. Last September, it announced a further £50 million investment that will make south Wales the home of its electric vehicle range.

I and many other colleagues across the House have worked hard over the last three years to make the case for investment in Britain. Despite the devastating news for south Wales operations, Ford’s commitment to the UK will remain as a major employer of some 10,000 people, with other significant operations in the country, including Ford’s technical centre in Dunton, Essex, which is home to Ford’s European market-leading commercial vehicle business; Ford’s engine facility in Dagenham, where it will continue to produce diesel engines; Ford’s mobility innovation office in London, where it will develop future mobility solutions in Europe; and the Halewood transmission plant, producing transmissions for cars such as the Ford Fiesta.

It remains the case that Ford, as an American company with a century-long history of operating successfully in the UK, undoubtedly recognises our international reputation as a place to do business, with skilled and innovative staff, access to innovation and a strong determination to make those strengths even greater in the years ahead. This is the Government’s ambition, as is well evidenced by the steps we have most recently taken to build on the successes of our automotive sector deal.

Our Advanced Propulsion Centre has awarded grants worth more than £800 million to more than 150 organisations across the UK. Just last month, the Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, my hon. Friend the Member for Pendle (Andrew Stephenson), announced a further £28 million of support to further enhance our UK Battery Industrialisation Centre, giving investment of more than £100 million in a world-leading facility to enable industry and academia to put the UK at the forefront of bringing battery technologies from the lab into the next generation of vehicles to drive on our streets. Working with industry, £30 million of investment through our driving the electric revolution programme will see support for innovation in electric motor technologies.

We are determined to ensure that the UK remains one of the most competitive locations in the world for automotive and other advanced manufacturing.
The announcement of this consultation by Ford is a disappointing blow, but the Government’s bold mission to put the UK at the forefront of the design and manufacturing of zero emission vehicles presents significant new opportunities for the UK. That includes new industries and ventures that will be well suited to the skills and expertise of those dedicated workers at Ford and their suppliers. I remain committed to ensuring that Bridgend and other parts of Wales benefit from that work. We will continue to work with the Welsh Government and our many partners across the industry as we seize the opportunity for Britain to provide great jobs and careers for hundreds of thousands of people across our country in the years ahead. I commend the statement to the House.

5.31 pm

Christina Rees (Neath) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the Secretary of State for advance sight of his statement.

Last Thursday’s news of the closure of the Ford plant in Bridgend was absolutely devastating for the exceptional workforce, their families, the town of Bridgend and the wider south Wales community. As a former Bridgend county borough councillor, I completely understand. It is absolutely devastating for the businesses in Ford’s supply chain and the tens of thousands employed in them, and it is absolutely devastating for the automotive sector, UK manufacturing and our entire economy. Ford must re think its plans to strip away 1,700 highly skilled, quality jobs from the area, and the UK Government must do all they can to support those dedicated workers.

This news is disastrous for all concerned. The chaos caused by the Tory Government’s calamitous handling of Brexit, coupled with the Secretary of State’s continuing inability to stand up for Wales, has allowed Ford to deliver a hammer blow to the workers in Bridgend and the Welsh economy. This is a betrayal of the hard-working and loyal staff who have been committed to delivering savings in making the Bridgend plant one of the most efficient in the world.

It is clear that Ford needs urgently to reverse this treacherous decision and to stand by the highly skilled workforce in Bridgend, rather than chasing profits via cheaper markets in places such as Mexico and India. It is disgraceful that Ford no longer produces a single vehicle in the UK despite its growing market share of car sales. Companies such as Ford originally chose to locate production plants in the UK because it was renowned for its skilled workforce and seen as economically stable compared with other turbulent markets across the world, but the Government’s botched Brexit has changed this. It is causing chaos and uncertainty and undermining business confidence.

Ford is just the latest in a long list of companies, including Airbus, Nissan, Honda and Jaguar Land Rover, to halt investment, cut jobs or close plants as a direct result of this uncertainty. We know that the Tory Government offered Nissan a deal. Was Ford offered a deal? There can be no doubt that this Government’s reckless threats of no deal, accelerated by a self-indulgent leadership contest with hard-Brexit contenders, is having an impact on business decisions across the UK, not just in Wales. Yet again, this is catastrophic news for Wales—news that has come as a direct result of UK Government shortcomings where Wales is concerned and that follows their shortcomings on rail electrification, the Swansea Bay tidal lagoon and the steel industry. This is just one of a string of failures on the Secretary of State’s watch. I call on him to apply pressure on Ford to do the right thing and rethink its catastrophic plans.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Bridgend (Mrs Moon) for all the work that she has done to support the plant and its workforce, now and in many previous years. I also thank my hon. Friend the Member for Ogmore (Chris Elmore)—who represents the neighbouring constituency—for all that he is doing to support the many hundreds of people in the area who are being affected. I thank other Welsh Labour Members whose constituents work at Bridgend Ford and in its supply chain, and I thank the trade unions.

The automotive industry is the backbone of our manufacturing sector, supporting highly skilled, quality employment and making an enormous contribution to our economy, but its future, in Bridgend and across the UK, is in jeopardy. I call on the Secretary of State to do now what he has failed to do previously and stand up for Wales. He must speak with Cabinet colleagues to seek the financial support and stimulus which will match what has already been committed by the Welsh Government.

Alun Cairns: I thank the hon. Lady for her comments, but I must express disappointment in the tone that she chose to take, which contrasted with the tone adopted by both the Welsh Government and the unions.

Earlier, the Business Secretary and I spoke to Ken Skates, the unions and many local Members of Parliament as part of a communications plan to share our ambitions and discuss the steps that we will take before the taskforce meets, hopefully later this week. Ken Skates and I will be joint vice-chairs of that taskforce and there will also be a chair from industry. That demonstrates the joint approach that we are taking, in a constructive way, recognising that this is a commercial decision made by Ford because of the change in the marketplace caused by the shift from petrol and diesel engines to electric vehicles. I commend the Welsh Government for the joint working that they have demonstrated so far, and I commend the unions for their engagement and the tone that they have adopted in the discussions.

Like many other Members, the hon. Lady pointed to Brexit. Those Members are being somewhat selective. It is right that the manufacturing sector, in particular, seeks a stable economic environment from which to export to the European market, but Ford was a strong supporter of the Prime Minister’s deal, which the Labour party chose to vote against. Whatever uncertainty exists over the Brexit negotiations, I think that the hon. Lady and other Labour Members need to accept their responsibility. They played a part in that. They have been highly selective in quoting comments and recommendations from Ford.

The hon. Lady was right to say that this is a highly efficient plant with a very skilled workforce. We will continue to work to attract investment in the site, be it from Ford—although we have not succeeded in doing that since the Jaguar Land Rover engine contract was announced—or others. We will also engage with other potential investors in the Brocastle site, which is adjacent to the Ford plant. We are in discussion with some potential investors at a mature stage, but it will be up to those organisations to make the final decision about whether to invest. We are in discussion with other
organisations in the automotive sector that could provide exciting opportunities. We all recognise the skill and the quality of the workforce. The potential investors recognise it, which is why they are engaging so positively with us and with the Welsh Government. I also underline that Ford job losses are also taking place in Europe: there have been 5,000 job losses in Germany as well as job losses and shift changes in Spain.

In closing my response to the hon. Lady, I remind her that there are now 100,000 more manufacturing jobs in the UK economy and 13,000 more manufacturing jobs in Wales than there were in 2010.

David T. C. Davies (Monmouth) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend welcome the fact that so many politicians in Cardiff, Bay and London who only last week were proclaiming climate change emergencies and competing for who could demand the fastest possible ban on petrol and diesel engines have suddenly become champions of the manufacturing of petrol and diesel engines in this country?

Alun Cairns: My hon. Friend makes an important point and highlights the shift taking place in the industry from petrol and diesel engines to electric vehicles. Some manufacturers are trying to catch up with the fast-changing consumer demand, but it is absolutely right that the UK is at the forefront of this technology, which is why we are investing so much in the sector to ensure we are active in the next generation of motor vehicles.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): I thank the Secretary of State for early sight of his statement. May I say on behalf of the SNP that our thoughts are clearly with the workers at Bridgend and those in the supply chain?

My constituency has suffered severe losses in manufacturing over the years, so I fully understand the devastating impact this can have on local communities, including the knock-on effects on shops and service providers. What supply chain impact assessment has been done as a result of the decision by Ford? What funding guarantees can be given to match Government actions, rather than just warm words?

The Secretary of State said that Brexit is not responsible for this decision, but Ford was one of the companies that warned of the dangers of a no-deal Brexit, so when for this decision, but Ford was one of the companies actions, rather than just warm words?

Alun Cairns: The hon. Gentleman makes the important point about supply chains and that was considered as part of our conference call discussing the formation of the taskforce. Work is undergoing to map the suppliers who supply Ford in Bridgend. We plan to then cross that over with the same work that is being done in relation to Honda in Swindon. A supplier might well be able to manage better the hit from one automotive manufacturer. The hit from two could obviously cause greater challenges and we want to work to respond to that. On funding, whatever support has been provided to the suppliers to Honda in Swindon is equally available to those who supply Ford in Bridgend.

The hon. Gentleman again points to Brexit, but I say to him that the automotive sector was a strong supporter of the deal the Prime Minister and the Government have agreed with the European Commission. The hon. Gentleman would do well to heed all of the sector’s message, if it wants to repeat some of the statements that it has made.

In relation to opportunities, the Government are investing significantly in the next generation of automotive vehicles not only through UK Government public funds but through attracting private investment in this field. Some of these investors are looking at locations in Europe and in the UK, and those are the organisations that we are naturally engaging with to ensure that the UK continues to play an active part at the forefront of this sector.

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): Will the Government now review the very high vehicle excise duties they have imposed, as well as the squeeze on car loans and the regulatory uncertainty about buying new petrol and diesel, because these are all factors that have done a lot of damage to demand and output in the UK car industry?

Alun Cairns: My right hon. Friend would do well to heed all of the sector’s message, if it wants to repeat some of the statements that it has made.

John Redwood: I should like to start by welcoming the Secretary of State’s statement, and I thank him and the Business Secretary for the constructive way in which they have engaged with me as the Member...
for the neighbouring constituency, in which a large majority of the workforce actually live, and with my hon. Friend the Member for Bridgend (Mrs Moon). We have been meeting the workforce and the unions points the weekend, and I welcome the way in which they are working with the Welsh Government.

It is reassuring to hear the Secretary of State say that he is willing to work in the taskforce and to do all he can to help to support the workforce, but can he set out here and now what he will do if there is a need for UK Government fiscal intervention to protect those jobs and possibly to make Ford change its mind? I believe that Ford still has questions to answer, given that just three weeks ago it was talking about the Dragon line being the most efficient of any of the plants across the world, including in Mexico.

My priority will be the families in my constituency who will be left devastated by this and the communities in my constituency that have not recovered from the de-industrialisation of the 1980s. This really will be a hammer blow to so many of them right across Ogmore, Bridgend, Aberavon and many other constituencies. We need a fiscal stimulus package and an automotive sector deal so that we can protect these jobs and these workers and ensure that these families have some security beyond September 2020.

Alun Cairns: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for raising those points and for his comments. He had earlier today reminded me that this is a consultation from Ford, and we will therefore work closely with the unions in challenging the assumptions and statements that Ford has made where we believe them not to be the case.

The UK has a good record of investment in this sector. According to the latest available data, there is a 20% uplift in investment in the automotive sector, which demonstrates that we still remain attractive. We will of course work closely with the Welsh Government on attracting investment to the area, to serve the hon. Gentleman’s constituents and the employees who come from a much wider field than just the community of Bridgend. We remember that there was a Ford plant in Swansea not so long ago and that people travelled to that. The effects therefore stretch much further west, east and north than just the Bridgend site.

The Welsh Government clearly have a responsibility under the devolution settlement for economic developments, but we will continue to work closely with them, as well as with the Department for International Trade, the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy and the whole might of Whitehall to support the employees by attracting investment to that site.

Mr David Jones (Clwyd West) (Con): The shadow Secretary of State, the hon. Member for Neath (Christina Rees), has sought to blame Brexit for Ford’s decision, but Stuart Rowley, the European President of Ford, has said in terms that it has nothing to do with Brexit. He has also said that “if Brexit had never happened, would there be a different decision, and the answer to that is no.”

Does my right hon. Friend not agree that it is particularly regrettable that Opposition Members should seek so cynically to exploit the personal tragedy of 1,700 people for such nakedly political purposes?

Alun Cairns: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for underlining the points in relation to Brexit, because Ford has stated clearly that Brexit has nothing to do with this decision. Furthermore, there would be more credibility in the Opposition’s points about Brexit if the engine plant was being shifted from the UK to anywhere else in the European Union, but we know that production is being shifted to Mexico. Therefore, I do not think the Brexit argument stacks up, and my right hon. Friend makes an important point that it is disappointing that many people will still refer to Brexit, which will undermine the potential for further investment in the site.

Stephen Kinnock (Aberavon) (Lab): This is a devastating blow for the workforce, many of whom are from my Aberavon constituency. The Secretary of State keeps saying that the situation in other EU countries is also difficult, but none of them has seen investment in the automotive sector drop by 80% in the past three years. The fact is that this Government are like a driverless vehicle and have been for the past three years. Their botched Brexit and general incompetence have seen confidence drain away from the automotive sector. When will we see a proper industrial strategy that helps the sector move from diesel and petrol to electric?

Alun Cairns: The hon. Gentleman makes an important point about the need to attract investment in this sector, but he is somewhat selective with the data that he presents. All automotive manufacturers have had challenges to meet in relation to changing consumer demand. For example, the UK is leading the way in attracting investment in the sector, and not only in terms of the scale of the money that I have already highlighted. Some 20% of all electric vehicles sold in Europe are manufactured here in the UK, which demonstrates that we are playing a prominent role.

Stephen Crabb (Preseli Pembrokeshire) (Con): It is true that this sad announcement has come during a once-in-a-hundred-year change within the global automotive sector, and so much of European automotive manufacturing finds itself on the wrong side of that change. Does my right hon. Friend agree that that underlines the need for a proper, joined-up industrial strategy for Wales, linked up between Cardiff and Westminster, with a focus on skills and education, which are not good enough in Wales, on improving transport, which is not good enough in Wales, and on improving and creating a more pro-business environment across the whole of Wales?

Alun Cairns: The UK’s modern industrial strategy clearly sets out the foundation for an approach across the UK that includes the automotive sector deal and other deals across a whole range of sectors, and the Welsh Government’s economic action plan dovetails well with that. However, my right hon. Friend makes an important point that we need to continue to work closely to ensure that the implementation of all that is as efficient as it should be, to be attractive to investors and to avoid extra complication due to the devolved Administrations. My right hon. Friend the Business Secretary, Ken Skates and I talk regularly about our ambitions to attract investment on a joint basis, and we work closely with the Department for International Trade, too.
Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (PC): The Secretary of State has been on an interesting journey from supporting remain during the referendum, when he said that the people of Wales could “suffer enormously” if they voted for Brexit, to supporting the most extreme Brexiteer in the Tory leadership—a reckless no-dealer. The reality is that we have a Secretary of State representing my country who is more interested in his own career than in the jobs of thousands of manufacturers back home in Wales.

Alun Cairns: The hon. Gentleman wants an independent Wales, but I am unsure what opportunities that would create for attracting investment in the Welsh economy. He will be well aware that I am a strong supporter of a deal with the European Union, but I have also stated clearly that maintaining no deal as an option, a challenge and a risk, both for the European Union and for the UK economy, focuses minds on gaining a deal. A deal will also create the best opportunities for the UK and European economies to continue to attract investment and to gain access to one another’s markets.

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): I will never forget the incredibly warm welcome I was given by my colleagues at Ford in Bridgend when I started there as a foreman in 1980, just a short time after it opened. I view this situation with huge sadness, which is why I urge the Secretary of State and the Business Secretary, who is sitting next to him, to do everything in their power to ensure that this factory continues, whether with Ford or with anybody else. In fact, Ford used to have a strong presence in Wales—not just in Swansea but also at Treforest, where it made sparkplugs. It is a great site, with railway and motorway links, and it must employ at least 1,700 people in the future, if not more, in high-quality manufacturing jobs. It deserves it.

Alun Cairns: My hon. Friend makes an extremely important point and speaks with passion and real understanding based on his experience of having worked at the site. He talks about the warm welcome, but the workforce has responded efficiently since the time he would have been working there to the opportunities to become one of the most efficient engine plants in Europe, which is commendable. There will be a great opportunity to attract further investment to the area not only because of the skills and assets among the workforce, but due to the site’s attractiveness. He mentions connectivity, with the site being close to the motorway, and I would also highlight the railway line that goes directly to the site, which is used to take the engines that are currently manufactured to the midlands and Europe.

Richard Burden (Birmingham, Northfield) (Lab): The circumstances facing Bridgend are obviously different from those that surrounded the collapse of MG Rover at Longbridge over a decade ago, but I still know something about the impact that the closure of a major car plant can have not only on jobs, but on a community’s sense of identity. The first message from this Chamber must therefore be one of solidarity with the workers of Ford at Bridgend and their families.

May I ask the Secretary of State two things? First, he said that he met the company, so has he suggested any alternatives to closure? If so, what were those alternatives; I did not hear them in his statement? Secondly, while Brexit may not be the immediate cause of this announcement, he knows that it is relevant to virtually every decision that any automotive manufacturer is making at the moment. Is this news not just further evidence that we must avoid no deal at all costs?

Alun Cairns: The hon. Gentleman makes an extremely important point about the sense of identity, and we view those comments positively because of the ownership that is felt in the community around the plant. However, it stretches far wider than that, which is why I was so keen to engage positively with the unions before the announcement became public, and I have also spoken to them on several occasions subsequently. As for challenging the assumptions that Ford has made, we will of course work closely with the unions, which have a better understanding of the actual factors in play within the plant. We will then work in challenging Ford on those issues.

I say to those who seek to try to blame Brexit for the decision that we are working hard to attract investment both to this site and to Wales. Opposition Members seek to misrepresent the position, because Ford has clearly stated that it proposes to take the production of the new engine to Mexico. I hope that people will not want to bring too much politics into the reality of trying to attract investment.

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): The Secretary of State represents the constituency next door to the plant, yet he will not rule out a no-deal Brexit. That is utterly irresponsible and provides the context, even if not the immediate cause, for why the automotive sector in this country, including at Ford in Bridgend, is on the brink, with 10,000 jobs at risk, with 50,000 more in the supply chain. When is he going to show some leadership?

Alun Cairns: Maybe I should answer that question with another question. When will the hon. Gentleman vote for the deal to provide a stable environment in which to continue exporting to the European Union?

Owen Smith (Pontypridd) (Lab): In February 2019, Ford said explicitly that the possibility of a no-deal Brexit was jeopardising its investment in the UK, including at Bridgend. Ford reportedly said directly to the Prime Minister that she must rule out a no-deal Brexit, lest we lose jobs. Just last week, the head of Make UK, representing manufacturing across this country, said that there is now a direct causal link between the threat of no deal by Conservative Members who are vying for the leadership, including the Secretary of State, and the loss of manufacturing jobs. How many more jobs do we need to lose in Wales and elsewhere before he tells the right hon. Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson) that we must never have a no-deal Brexit?

Alun Cairns: The hon. Gentleman quotes Ford from February, but I can quote Ford from before each and every meaningful vote in this House. It is strange that he is happy to heed Ford’s calls when it suits him but did not respond to its calls to vote in favour of the deal that the Prime Minister agreed with the European Commission. On job numbers, I point to the record job creation numbers we have seen in Wales in recent times, which compare favourably with when his party was in government.
Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): Some 27% of our output in the Gwent valleys comes from manufacturing, and some of our leading employers in Blaenau Gwent are in the automotive sector. Can the Secretary of State guarantee that Ford workers and suppliers will get the same package of financial support that was offered to Honda just up the M4?

Alun Cairns: Yes, I can. I have already stated that the support made available to Honda and its supply chain will be available to Ford and its supply chain. The hon. Gentleman makes an important point about the manufacturing sector, which is extremely important to the Welsh economy. I am sure he shares in the recognition that there are now 13,000 more manufacturing jobs in Wales than there were in 2010.

Jessica Morden (Newport East) (Lab): Ford’s announcement is indeed a bitter blow for workers at Bridgend and will be felt across south Wales, and all our efforts should be put into supporting those who are affected. With the car industry in crisis, the steelworkers I met on Friday at Cogent, owned by Tata, want the Government to be proactive in helping to develop and support the supply chain for electric vehicles. Companies like Orb have the workforce and the expertise, but what will the Government do to support such companies through the industrial strategy for the future of this industry?

Alun Cairns: The hon. Lady highlights the £1.1 billion that has been made available through a range of schemes, including the Faraday challenge, the Stephenson challenge, the autonomous vehicle initiative and the advanced Propulsion Centre. These schemes are available to companies across the whole UK, and many Welsh organisations are making active use of them.

Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): Whether in terms of its impact on just-in-time manufacturing, on tariffs or, indeed, on regulatory alignment, no deal would be a disastrous outcome for manufacturing. Does the Secretary of State agree that anyone who wishes to keep that outcome on the table as a credible option simply is not putting Wales first?

Alun Cairns: The hon. Gentleman talks about remaining in Europe, but the sector strongly supports the deal that the Prime Minister negotiated with the European Commission. The Government and I responded positively to the sector’s statements. Perhaps he should have also supported the sector and responded to it at that time, too.

Tonia Antoniazzi (Gower) (Lab): A constituent of mine, like many other workers, has been back to the plant today and took the time to message me. He says that Ford is telling the workers that the plant is no longer viable. This is a bitter pill to swallow because the UK has been one of Ford’s best markets throughout the years. The employees feel that the plant has been manipulated by Ford into no longer being viable.

I have two questions for the Secretary of State. In a potential post-Brexit United Kingdom, where will the 1,700 jobs in south Wales—plus the impact on the supply chain—come from? Moreover, will he explain why he believes that the right hon. Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson) will be the saviour of the future prosperity and wellbeing of the people of Wales? I and many of my colleagues believe that actions speak louder than words, and the only words I have heard from the Secretary of State today are potential, not action.

Alun Cairns: The hon. Lady asks where the jobs will come from, which is a reasonable and fair question. We work closely with the unions and the Welsh Government in seeking to exploit every opportunity to attract investment to the site, be it from Ford or from any other manufacturer or organisation. The UK’s industrial strategy clearly sets out ambitions for the UK to become a leader in the next generation of automotive. The Advanced Propulsion Centre, the Stephenson challenge and the Faraday challenge, from which Welsh companies are already significantly benefitting, highlight why we have seen such a sharp uplift in investment in the sector for the latest full-year statistics that are available, and for the opportunities that come thereafter.

I have already highlighted what Ford has said, but I can also point to Aston Martin, McLaren and Toyota. So many organisations that either operate or are based in Wales, or elsewhere in the UK, strongly support the deal that the Prime Minister has negotiated, but the hon. Lady chose to vote against it, which I find very disappointing.

Frank Field (Wirral West) (Lab): Although the whole House is concentrating on the actions that the Government should take to save jobs at Bridgend, this news sends a chill down the spine of all car workers in this country and of those in the supply chain. I have workers at Vauxhall who must be very concerned. The Secretary of State
State said earlier that he is working closely with the Business Secretary. Will the two of them bring before the House, as soon as possible, the proactive moves they are now making to save car jobs in this country so that we do not have another appalling statement like this one?

Alun Cairns: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for making those points. The investment at Ellesmere Port is clearly important not only to his constituency but to the north Wales economy, where many of the employees will come from. Vauxhall, of course, has committed to investing in Luton, and we continue to discuss and attract further investment by Vauxhall, but this commitment demonstrates its interest and recognition of the UK workforce's expertise, both at Ford in Bridgend and in and around the right hon. Gentleman's constituency. I will happily meet him to discuss specific actions being taken that could also support his constituency.

Anna McMorrin (Cardiff North) (Lab): This closure is devastating news for families across Wales, including those affected in my constituency and across the whole of south Wales, and for the supply chain businesses affected, as a huge number of people are involved in the supply chain. The Secretary of State is wholly wrong to rule out Brexit being a causal factor in this decision. The former First Minister of Wales, Carwyn Jones, said today that closure was “never on the agenda” during his very recent private discussions with Bridgend Ford. So can the Secretary of State please rule out a no-deal Brexit and the irresponsible message he is giving to every manufacturer across the industry, across the UK and across Wales today? Will he give that assurance to the car industry and to everyone?

Alun Cairns: The hon. Lady suggests I am wholly wrong to rule out Brexit as a cause, but those are not my views; they are the clear statements that have been made by Ford, both in private and in public. There would be much greater credibility in the statements being made by people seeking to make party political advantage out of this position, which is disappointing, if Ford was moving its operations to the European Union. Clearly, Ford is not doing that; it is moving the engine manufacture to Mexico, which clearly highlights that this is nothing to do with our exit from the EU. She asks me to rule out no deal, but in order to rule that out, you presumably need to vote for a deal, and I have done so on each and every occasion.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): The Secretary of State has quoted Ford's Europe chairman, Steven Armstrong, so may I quote him back to the Secretary of State? He said:

“We've been very consistent since the referendum that a hard Brexit, a no-deal Brexit, would be a disaster.”

So does the Secretary of State believe that loose talk about delivering no deal by leading Tory leadership contenders damages the UK car industry or assists it? Does he think that if the Chancellor has a Brexit war chest, it could be spent on investing in the UK car industry, including in electric vehicles, rather than on tax cuts for the wealthy, as some are advocating in their leadership campaigns?

Alun Cairns: Again, the right hon. Gentleman quotes what Ford has said, but Ford also said, “Please vote for the deal.” Perhaps he should answer the question of why he did not vote in favour of the deal.

Geraint Davies (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op): My father, David Davies, was head of economic development at the Welsh Office in the '70s and was instrumental in getting Ford to Bridgend, with the help of inducements from a Labour Government, including the rail link the Secretary of State mentioned and other financial inducements. The Secretary of State knows that wages in Wales are the lowest in the UK, at 70% of gross value added, and that the impact of Brexit is in big companies such as Airbus, Ford and Tata realising that they will no longer be in that market and relocating and reducing their workforce. Will he therefore think again about providing a people's vote so that people can vote on whether they actually do want to leave, because people from that Bridgend plant who voted to leave did not vote to leave their jobs? Will he rule out any no-deal Brexit? Finally, will he make sure that none of the convergence funding that we currently get will be stripped away and given to other parts of the UK? If he will give none of those undertakings, will he resign?

Alun Cairns: The way in which the hon. Gentleman is pursuing the question suggests that this is a debate about Brexit, but Ford has said that it is not and is acting in a way that demonstrates that it is not. It is not about judging Ford's statements; it is about judging its actions and the actions it plans to take arising from this issue. He is right in that the manufacturing sector, in particular, wishes to seek some certainty, and that is what we are seeking to bring about, but by voting against the deal on three separate occasions, the uncertainty over the economy has obviously been created.

Gerald Jones (Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney) (Lab): Coming on the back of the similar announcement by Honda, this announcement by Ford will have a devastating impact on its workers and on the supply chain right across south Wales, including in my constituency. We absolutely need a co-ordinated response with the Welsh Government, local government and others, but may I ask the Secretary of State what immediate priority he will give in the coming days to ensuring that those in the company—the workers and the trade unions—are afforded all the support they need?

Alun Cairns: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for raising an important question, which absolutely will affect the employees in his constituency who work at the site. I have mentioned that the taskforce being established will have an industry leader, and Ken Skates and I will be the joint vice-chairs of that group. We will, of course, work closely with the UK Government Departments, the Welsh Government and the unions. I should also pay the greatest respect to the Welsh Automotive Forum for the work it has done in helping us to map the supply chains, many of which will be across not only Wales, but the rest of the UK. Over the coming days, we expect to be able to announce the chair of the taskforce. We have agreed that we want the taskforce to meet as quickly as possible and frequently, certainly in the early stages, and that we want to set up a number of working groups to tackle the individual issues that the taskforce will highlight, be it people, place or the potential for investment on that site.
Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): The workers at Vauxhall in Ellesmere Port send their solidarity to those in Bridgend who have lost their jobs and to those who are going to lose their jobs in the wider supply chain. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Birkenhead (Frank Field) said, we are concerned about what is happening to the car industry in this country. It seems to be disintegrating before our eyes and the Government appear to be powerless to stop it. I know that the Secretary of State has mentioned various aspects of the industrial strategy that we hope are going to reverse some of these damaging job losses, but self-evidently this is not enough. Please may we have more action, on business rates, on energy costs and on actually encouraging investment in the first place, because once these jobs go, they are gone forever?

Alun Cairns: First, let me say that Vauxhall is investing in Britain, and that should give the hon. Gentleman confidence as to the approach and attitude that Vauxhall is showing towards the UK economy. However, he is right to highlight the need for further investment. For the last full year for which data is available, business investment in automotive was £5.3 billion, which is a 20% uplift on the previous year. Clearly, these things will vary from tranche to tranche, so we need to be looking at the trend, rather than just seeking to overstate the figures in order to be selective. This is a positive environment, and automotive research and development amounts to 15% of total UK R&D, which highlights the importance that the private sector and the UK Government place on the automotive sector, so that we can provide the next generation of automotive vehicles.

Frank Field (Birkenhead) (Ind): Tomorrow when business collapses.

Mr Speaker: We are grateful to the right hon. Gentleman. More accurately put to the House at this stage, as we are not psychic, as simply tomorrow.

NATIONAL INSURANCE CONTRIBUTIONS (TERMINATION AWARDS AND SPORTING TESTIMONIALS) BILL (PROGRAMME) (NO. 2)

Ordered, that the Order of 30 April 2019 (National Insurance Contributions (Termination Awards and Sporting Testimonials) Bill (Programme)) be varied as follows:

(1) Paragraphs (4) and (5) of the Order shall be omitted.

(2) Proceedings on Consideration and any proceedings in legislative grand committee shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion two hours after the commencement of proceedings on the Motion for this Order.

(3) Proceedings on Third Reading shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion three hours after the commencement of proceedings on the Motion for this Order.—(Amanda Milling)
National Insurance Contributions (Termination Awards and Sporting Testimonials) Bill

Consideration of Bill, not amended in the Public Bill Committee

New Clause 1

Review of the impact of Class 1A National Insurance Contributions on termination awards

“(1) The Secretary of State must, within 12 months of section 1 of this Act (termination awards: Great Britain) coming into force, undertake a review of the impact of the new Class 1A liability on termination awards in excess of £30,000.

(2) The review under section 1 must contain—
(a) an assessment of the impact the new Class 1A liability has on the level of termination payments workers receive;
(b) an assessment of the impact the new Class 1A liability has on employers;
(c) a distributional analysis of the new Class 1A liability; and
(d) anything else the Secretary of State considers appropriate.

(3) The review under section 1 must be laid before both Houses of Parliament.”—(Peter Dowd.)

Brought up, and read the First time.

6.18 pm

Peter Dowd (Bootle) (Lab): I beg to move, That the clause be read a Second time.

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

New clause 2—Report on the impact of Class 1A National Insurance Contributions on termination awards

“(1) The Secretary of State must, within 12 months of section 1 of this Act (termination awards: Great Britain) coming into force, lay before Parliament a report on the expected impact of the new Class 1A liability on termination awards in excess of £30,000.

(2) That report must contain an assessment of the expected impact on—
(a) the total net value of termination payments received by individuals;
(b) the average net value of such payments; and
(c) the number of business start-ups using termination payments as funding in their first year in each region of the United Kingdom.”

New clause 3—Report on the impact of Class 1A National Insurance Contributions on sporting testimonials

“(1) The Secretary of State must, within 12 months of section 3 of this Act (sporting testimonials: Great Britain) coming into force, lay before Parliament a report on the expected impact of the provisions of this Act on sporting testimonials.

(2) That report must contain an assessment of the expected impact on—
(a) the total amounts received by individuals from sporting testimonials; and
(b) donations made to charity from sporting testimonial proceeds.”

New clause 4—Report on Exchequer impact

“The Secretary of State must, within three years of this Act receiving Royal Assent, lay before Parliament a report on its Exchequer impact.”

New clause 5—Effects of termination awards provisions

“(1) The Treasury must publish reviews of whether the payment of Class 1A contributions on termination awards under sections 1 and 2 has had—
(a) any effect on the number of termination awards made above £30,000;
(b) any effect on the size of termination awards made above £30,000; or
(c) a disproportionate effect on—
(i) women,
(ii) pregnant women,
(iii) persons aged 50 or over, or
(iv) any other group of people with protected characteristics (within the meaning of the Equality Act 2010).

(2) The first review under subsection (1) shall be published no later than 24 months after this section comes into force.

(3) Subsequent reviews under subsection (1) shall be published no later than 24 months after publication of the previous review.”

This new clause would provide for a general review of the termination awards provisions of this Act within every period of 24 months.

Amendment 1, in clause 5, page 5, line 39, at end insert—

“(3A) No regulations may be made under subsection (3) to bring section 3 or 4 into force until the Secretary of State has made a Statement to the House of Commons on the expected effects of the provisions of this Act on donations to charities by the recipients of sporting testimonial payments.”

Peter Dowd: Although he is not here, may I welcome the new Financial Secretary to the Treasury to his post, and congratulate his predecessor, the new Leader of the House, on his elevation to the Cabinet? I understand that the elevation was short-lived, as he realised that he still had to sit across a table—a Cabinet table rather than a Treasury one—from the Chief Secretary. I expect that if some of his colleagues get their way on proroguing Parliament, he may well even be put on a zero-hours contract, because there would be little else to do.

I have previously stated, both on Second Reading and in Committee, when we had wide ranging discussions on the Bill, as we always do with financial Bills—we talk about a whole range of issues and get into all sorts of discussions about various things, even quoting Cicero and going into all sorts of Greek mythology; it is helpful to broaden our horizons when dealing with these Bills—that the Bill is a pale imitation of the great national insurance reforms that the Government promised to enact just a few years ago, in those halcyon days of the 2010 to 2015 Tory Government, who were going to conquer the world and who proposed massive changes to national insurance contributions. Of course, in effect, nothing came of that. The former Chancellor went west and the proposals lay around gathering a little bit of dust, then more dust and then even more dust on the shelves at the Treasury.

As we all know, national insurance is paid by employees, employers and the self-employed, and it is used to fund a variety of contributory benefits such as the state pension, contributory employment and support allowance, maternity allowance and other benefits. In 2018-19, national insurance contributions raised around £137 billion, which is more than was raised by VAT but less than was raised by income tax, at £132 billion and £192 billion respectively. National insurance contributions are clearly a substantial revenue raiser for the Exchequer.
Along with the Prime Minister, the Government’s credibility and all sense of reason in the Tory party, gone are the proposed abolition of class 2 national insurance contributions and the proposed expansion of class 4 national insurance contributions, along with the Government’s parliamentary majority to boot. Those proposals have been replaced with these meagre clauses, which masquerade as a real Bill. They will introduce a limited class 1A employer charge on termination payments over £30,000 and on payments over £100,000 related to non-contractual sporting testimonials.

While we are on the subject of sport—loosely—I reaffirm my congratulations to Liverpool football club on their win, albeit as an Everton supporter. As I said in Committee, I can say that in the clear knowledge that it probably will not get much further than the people present, so I will not be criticised by my Everton-supporting friends and family. Saying it here tonight makes it more or less a secret, in essence.

Consideration of the Bill’s remaining stages has been brought forward to pack out an empty parliamentary timetable. The timing could not be more fortuitous, as we enter the first official week of the long-running Tory leadership campaign. It is a burden for everybody else to have to put up with it, and I am sure it is a burden for those on the Government Front Bench and Back Benches, too. I suspect that they will not say that, but I will say it for them.

There is a backdrop to this debate. We have already seen a sneak preview of the chaos and dysfunction that any of the hard Tory Brexiteers who are running for Prime Minister will soon unleash on the country. The right hon. Member for Tatton (Ms McVey) has suggested purging the Cabinet of remain-supporting MPs. The frontrunner, the right hon. Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson), is flirting with the idea of the UK going AWOL with around £48 billion in October. That figure is almost as big as his ego. The Foreign Secretary, the right hon. Member for South West Surrey (Mr Hunt), has more positions on Brexit than the “Kama Sutra”.

Meanwhile, the right hon. Member for Esher and Walton (Dominic Raab) is threatening to put two fingers up to parliamentary sovereignty and prorogue the House, denying the elected representatives in this Chamber a say over the biggest issue facing this country since the second world war, and perhaps beyond that—I do thank you for your indulgence, Mr Deputy Speaker. So much for bringing back control. To what—an empty, locked Chamber? It is important, because had Parliament been prorogued, would we have been able to debate this Bill on national insurance contributions? No, we would not. Where would all the money go? We would not have it. We are here making the case for why Parliament should not be prorogued, but more importantly we are making the case because we have to get the cash in. All this is taking place while our European partners look on in polite bemusement, along with the rest of the country, as we are subjected to a month-long Conservative party psychodrama. That context is important to the matter at hand.

The Opposition continue to have concerns about how the new class 1A national insurance charge will impact on the level of termination awards that workers receive, particularly in respect of women, employees over 50 and pregnant women. Opposition new clauses 1 and 5 would require Ministers to adequately address our concerns. The tax and national insurance treatment of termination payments remains a sensitive topic to workers and employers alike. Employees facing redundancy often consider this final payment as an evaluation of the work that they have done for their employer, so it is psychologically important for them. As I have previously said, termination payments therefore have an emotional and a financial significance, and the amount awarded is often determined by painstaking and careful negotiations between managers and trade union representatives.

The Government’s rationale for the change apparently remains one of simplification: they cite many employers’ previous confusion as to what parts of a termination payment might qualify for exemption from tax and national insurance. However, Ministers have also cited the opportunity for well-advised employers to avoid paying the right amount of tax and national insurance on termination payments as justification for wider reform. It is important to repeat that that seems to have been given as justification for wider reform. We do not necessarily accept that justification. Neither the Office of Tax Simplification nor Treasury Ministers have been able to provide figures on the number of employers who have taken advantage of the existing loophole or on the amount that has been lost to the Exchequer as a result. That is important, because if a case is going to be made for something, the least we could be given is a little evidence—a few facts and statistics—to back up the assertion.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): The best way to describe it is as a stealth tax on people who are going to be unemployed for quite a long period. Women are going to be under the cosh. We have to remind ourselves that women seem to be paying the price. We have only to consider the long, drawn-out saga of the Women Against State Pension Inequality, who cannot even get justice out of this Government.

Peter Dowd: My hon. Friend makes a valid point. Assessments of the impact of austerity have found that 86% of the burden has fallen on women. The figures indicate that women are the most badly affected by austerity, and all this Bill does is overlay that and add the ante even further. I thank my hon. Friend for making that point, because in effect it is a stealth tax. That is what it amounts to: a stealth tax with no evidence base whatever to support it, other than the Government just wanting somehow to get more and more cash in because of their failed economic policies.

Grahame Morris (Easington) (Lab): I am grateful to my hon. Friend for giving way. The arguments that he is making are sound. There is a concern that this may well open the gates to further measures in the future. I fully understand that this is a charge that is being applied to employers, but it would be instructive if we used plain English and simple terminology. Why do we not use the term “redundancy” instead of “termination awards”, so that people will realise what is happening?

6.30 pm

Peter Dowd: That is a very good point, because that is exactly what the Government do time after time. When they introduce these notions and concepts, they always try to put up a bit of a smokescreen. My hon. Friend is
[Peter Dowd]

absolutely spot on. Let us call this essentially what it is, which is redundancy. Potentially, it is taking money from people at perhaps one of the most vulnerable times in their working life. Let me repeat: what we want is evidence. This an evidence-free zone—it is as simple as that. The other important point to make is that this is, in effect, a stealth tax. Worryingly, though, there is no coherence to this whatsoever. There is no coherence to this at all. Somebody comes up with an idea and the Government push it through because they want to push it through. There is no evidence for it whatsoever.

James Cartlidge (South Suffolk) (Con): I have enjoyed discussing this Bill with the hon. Gentleman in Committee and on Second Reading. The definition of a stealth tax is surely a tax that is stealthy. In other words, it is not immediately visible, and has to be found in the small print of, for example, the Red Book. This is on the front of a Bill; this is the name of the Bill. I do not think that this can conceivably be described as a stealth tax. The Government have been very open about it, and it is on the front of the Bill.

Peter Dowd: I am very pleased that a Conservative Member of Parliament admits that he is putting taxes up. He has admitted that the Government are openly putting up taxes. Okay, even if I accept that it is not a stealth tax—

James Cartlidge rose—

Peter Dowd: Just a moment. Even if I accept—[Interruption.] I am happy to give way. Even if I accept, which I do not, that it is not a stealth tax, it is, none the less, about a Tory Government putting taxes up. It is as simple as that. I will give way to the hon. Gentleman.

James Cartlidge: The point is not whether it is going up, but whether it is being done in a stealthy fashion. I accept that this is raising revenue. The Minister will not cut it, because that will take revenue from elsewhere.

The question is whether it is stealthy. It is on the front of the Bill; it is the name of the Bill. It is not remotely stealthy. Stealth taxes are so named when we pull the wool over people’s eyes, but this is very open and transparent, and, yes, it will increase revenue for the Treasury.

Peter Dowd: The hon. Gentleman can point that out to me as much as he wants. I admitted, or acknowledged—call it what you will—that even if it is not a stealth tax, it is a Tory Government putting up taxes. [Interruption.] We agree on that. [Interruption.] I am happy to have that conversation with him outside the Chamber, if need be, so that I do not get into trouble with either you, Mr Deputy Speaker, or those Members on the packed Benches. The bottom line is that what we have here is quite clearly and unambiguously an admission from the Tories that they are putting taxes up. That is what it comes down to. [Interruption.] My hon. Friend the Member for Coventry South (Mr Cunningham) says from a sedentary position that they do so in a sneaky way.

Ministers have claimed many times that they have a desire to simplify tax. They talk all the time about simplification of tax. They have an Office for Tax Simplification. They institutionalised it. Has there been much simplification? Not as far as I am concerned. There certainly has not been any simplification of national insurance contributions. Therefore, despite the many claims from Ministers that they have a desire to simplify the tax and national insurance treatment of termination awards, the Chartered Institute of Taxation and other tax experts have raised concerns about the lack of information in the Bill as to how this new class 1A charge will be collected. In their rush to try to get more money into the Exchequer, they have not even decided or worked out how they are going to collect it.

Mr Jim Cunningham: I thank my hon. Friend for giving way. I made a remark about sneaky tax from a sedentary position. I have a good example of why we should not trust what those on the Government Front Bench say: in their manifesto, they pledged to retain the free television licence for old-age pensioners. What did they do? They passed it on to the BBC. We have all seen the announcement today. How can we trust anything they say?

Peter Dowd: That is another Stealth tax—the television licence. The fundamental point is important. It goes to the heart of this debate. This is a rise in taxes. We are not quite sure how it is going to be collected, but it is going to be collected from some of the most vulnerable people. Currently, Ministers plan to leave it up to secondary legislation to determine how it is going to be collected. That is another important point. This has happened so many times with this Government—no amendments to the law in relation to the Finance Bill. Again, this goes to the heart of the matter. The Government bring forward legislation, proposals and policies to this Chamber. They try to push something through, but they do not tell us how and when they are going to do it. But they are going to do it. We have no opportunity to challenge them because they close down the debate. They have done so on the last four Finance Bills, I think—I stand to be corrected on that one.

Currently, Ministers plan to leave that up to secondary legislation, which is clearly a break from normal practice. Furthermore, rather than simplifying the national insurance treatment of termination awards, they look set to confuse employers even more. Therefore, a fundamental attempt apparently to simplify these proposals has actually not simplified them. If the raison d’être for this is simplification—that is what we have been told—the Government are that incompetent that they cannot even get that right, because it is not simplifying matters at all.

The measure will also add additional administrative burdens on HMRC at a time when it continues to be hamstrung by the Government’s disastrous reorganisation of its estate, the introduction of Making Tax Digital and the preparations for a no-deal Brexit. These specific proposals are being introduced when HMRC is in flux, but do the Government care? They do not care at all. So what is the so-called rationale for the introduction of this new national insurance contribution charge on termination awards, if not to make things more confusing for employers? Another factor has been thrown in: this is a tax avoidance measure, apparently. [Interruption.] The Minister says that he is not sure about that. Read some of the documentation.

Matt Warman (Boston and Skegness) (Con): He didn’t say that.
Peter Dowd: I beg your pardon. So it is a tax avoidance measure, apparently, without any evidence, as far as we can gather, that there is any substantive tax avoidance going on with regard to this. I am all for tackling tax avoidance, as the Minister well knows. We support the tackling of tax avoidance, but we always want to do it when there is some evidence for it. We have lots of evidence of tax avoidance in other areas that the Government are not tackling, and in an area for which they do not have a particular amount of evidence, they are tackling it. It is a bit topsy-turvy—a bit round about. We find ourselves in a rather bizarre scenario.

I suggest that the Government’s rationale is wholly to do with the revenue that they expect to raise and that this is little more than an attempt to increase national insurance receipts for the Exchequer while shying away from any major tax or national policy change. The previous Chancellor got his fingers well and truly burned because he did not do it right. That is the issue here. We are having all this tinkering around, which is making matters more and more confused. That is certainly the opinion of the Office of Tax Simplification, as advocated in its 2014 report, which stated that a new national insurance charge could raise revenues for the Exchequer and offset the costs of any tax treatment change affecting termination payments. The report went on to concede that the policy was likely to lead to increased NICs costs to the employer—not just more NICs, but increased costs to the employer—and to individual employees receiving reduced termination payments, as employers would be unlikely to increase their redundancy budgets.

The Government’s own impact assessment notes that this measure will present an “additional cost to employers”. Here we are yet again, with the party of business putting more and more costs on to employers through this national insurance contributions proposal, at a time when they are all under terrible stress for a whole range of reasons—not least because of the uncertainty of Brexit. The impact assessment also says that this will be “reflected in lower wages and profit margins”.

Not only are the Government attacking businesses and bringing their profits down; they are also accepting that they are attacking workers’ wages. It is a double whammy, as the employer and the employee both get stung. What a state of affairs! Sadly, it is some of the most vulnerable people in the workforce who will pay the ultimate price. Whether it is a pregnant female employee voluntarily leaving the workforce or an older worker opting for early retirement, the new national insurance contributions charge will have a significant impact on the level of termination awards received.

To address the issue, the Opposition have tabled new clause 5, which would require the Government to undertake a review every two years looking at the impact of this measure on women, pregnant women, workers over the age of 50 and any other group of people with protected characteristics. New clause 5 would ensure that the impact of the new national insurance charge was carefully monitored; that is very important. It would also require Ministers to take personal responsibility for its outcome, with regular statements to the House. I know Ministers do not like doing that—Mr Speaker in effect acts as the personal representative of Ministers when they come here to speak to us—but it is important that Ministers come to this Chamber to explain what they are doing. They are responsible to Parliament for their actions. The Executive are responsible to us and that is what we are demanding through new clause 5.

Similarly, new clause 1 would require Treasury Ministers to undertake a distributional analysis of class 1A national insurance contributions, looking specifically at the impact on the level of termination awards received by employees and, importantly, at the impact on employers. I am particularly thinking about small and medium-sized business owners, who are likely to see added costs as a result of the measure. We want to ensure that such employers are not going to be penalised because of the lack of evidence base for the Government’s proposals—other than, quite simply, that the measure will raise money. The Government should stop telling the House that this is about simplification, because it is not. We have to be honest about that. It is just about raising revenue. There is nothing wrong with doing that—it is crucial—but it is important that the Government are honest about what they are doing. They often get their figures wrong when they indicate how much they intend to raise. In fact, some of the figures identified in their proposals are almost a work of fiction.

The second and final measure covered by this very short Bill relates to a new class 1A charge for non-contractual sporting testimonials of more than £100,000. I can hear the Government Front Benchers saying that I am making a long speech. Well, I know that Conservative Ministers do not like to be held to account at all; it is in their DNA. One of their colleagues, who is a contender for the leadership, even wants to prorogue Parliament—to close it down—so it is important that I make these points clear.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Oxford East (Anneliese Dodds) said in Committee, there remains a huge lack of clarity over how the charge will be applied, particularly when it comes to a payment that would be “customary”. She made a very important point and hit the nail on the head, and I am not quite sure that we are any further on at all from those discussions in Committee. There remain seriously unanswered questions as to how a national insurance contribution charge on sporting testimonial payments, which are in effect charitable donations from fans, would affect sporting charities and foundations set up by individual sportspeople. The Chartered Institute of Taxation has also pointed out the clear inconsistency that would arise between the national insurance treatment of sporting testimonial payments and the treatment of voluntary tips in the service industry. To answer these concerns, the Opposition have tabled amendment 1, which would require the Government to review the impact of this class 1A national insurance contributions charge on donations to charities.

It is simply the case that the Bill is yet another desperate attempt by the Government to shift the tax burden from the well-off to workers. Rather than cracking down on evidence-based tax avoidance and ensuring that large corporations pay their fair share, Ministers are yet again introducing measures designed to raise additional revenue for the Exchequer from workers’ termination payments. This time, Ministers have elected for an indirect form of taxation through the introduction of a new employer national insurance charge, which will incentivise employers to cut wages, reduce non-statutory termination pay and leave some of the most vulnerable
in the workforce worse off, just as they are facing the distress of losing their job and uncertainty over their future. That is quite unconscionable.

Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): I have listened very carefully to my hon. Friend and I totally agree with him. May I concentrate on the issue of testimonials? One of the great myths about professional sportspeople is that they are all terribly well paid, but county cricketers, people playing in the lower regions of football and rugby players playing outside the premier league are not well paid. Traditionally, long-term servants have had the opportunity of a testimonial and those testimonials are often organised by groups of volunteers. Are we seriously suggesting that people who organise a darts match, a pool tournament or a dinner are going to be brought into the regime, whereby they have to think about national insurance contributions, taxation and the rest? That is surely crazy.

Peter Dowd: My hon. Friend makes an important point. The Government would have us believe that there is an amount of money that people can raise or earn before the testimonial tax—that is what it is—comes in. I am sure that the Minister will be able to explain that to us, but we have had very little help by way of explanation from the Government on this whole area, and the measure is being introduced without significant or appropriate discussion.

Members will no doubt be pleased that I will only speak for another hour—I jest. This is yet another piecemeal reform designed to penalise employers and workers alike, while raising comparatively small sums for the Exchequer compared with the total amount of national insurance contributions that it receives each year, which I identified earlier as more than £130 billion. Of course, the Government remain wedded to cutting taxes for large corporations and the wealthy alike, leaving our public services and ordinary workers footing the bill. In fact—this is important—the right hon. Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip has committed to £10 billion of tax cuts should he become Prime Minister, for Uxbridge and South Ruislip has committed to £10 billion to supporting wealthy investors, we can be financially worse off as a result of this change. If the front-runner for the Tory party leadership can give £10 billion to supporting new business start-ups, and we may not see some of those businesses that go on to be phenomenally successful just for want of a few extra pounds in the termination award that is made.

Another thing that concerns me is that the Government’s projections show that wages for everybody will fall as a result of this additional charge on employers. The Government have admitted that; it is included within the calculation. Even people who are not receiving termination awards or are not, at any stage, likely to receive them—even those who are receiving only the Government’s national living wage, which is a pretendy living wage that people cannot live on, and those who receive them—even those who are receiving only the Government’s national living wage, which is a pretendy living wage that people cannot live on, and those who are under 25 and therefore not eligible for it—will experience a reduction in wages as a result of the termination payment that they received. I am concerned that reducing the amount of termination awards that people receive will mean that there will be fewer of those new business start-ups, and we may not see some of those businesses that go on to be phenomenally successful just for want of a few extra pounds in the termination award that is made.

One other thing that concerns me is that the Government’s projections show that wages for everybody will fall as a result of this additional charge on employers. The Government have admitted that; it is included within the calculation. Even people who are not receiving termination awards or are not, at any stage, likely to receive them—even those who are receiving only the Government’s national living wage, which is a pretendy living wage that people cannot live on, and those who are under 25 and therefore not eligible for it—will experience a reduction in wages as a result of the Government’s changes to employer class 1A liability in relation to termination awards. It is not fair that we are asking people who already do not have enough to live on to pay this additional contribution. That might seem to be an odd position to take in this Chamber when we have Conservative leadership candidates talking about lowering tax for the very richest, but I do not believe that wages should be lowered for those at the bottom of the pile, to increase what is in the Government’s coffers. If we are to do that, surely we should choose, as the Scottish Government have done, to levy that money through a more progressive taxation system.

The other issue with the termination awards aspect relates to the collection method that is described. Currently—this is from the Government’s website—employers pay class 1A...
and 1B national insurance on expenses and benefits they give to their employees. They have to fill in the forms only once a year and are given a deadline for doing so. The Government have not yet said how they intend these payments to be paid in real time, or how they intend that employers should ensure that they are recording them and paying them in real time. If the Government expect them to do this, they need to clarify that more quickly. I am particularly concerned about the employers who currently do not pay class 1A contributions in any way, shape or form because they do not allow employee benefits such as company cars or health insurance as part of their deal, yet are now being brought into class 1A contributions because, for some unknown reason, the Government have chosen to use class 1A contributions as the method of collection—the method of liability—rather than choosing a different method. Class 1A contributions are not levied on any cash just now; they are levied only on benefits in kind.

Therefore, a number of employers will need to have new computer systems to pay this money. Those who do already pay for benefits in kind will need to have a different computer system that allows them to pay in real time rather than at the end of the year. That will involve a lot of additional work for HMRC and for tax professionals who will have to advise employers on this method. That is an extra cost to employers—not just the actual additional money that they will have to pay but the additional administration cost that they will have to go through. It is incredibly important that if the Government intend to press ahead with this, they do everything they can to ensure that every employer who does not currently have any liability for class 1A contributions, in particular, is well aware of these changes and the new liability that will arise if they make any termination payments in excess of £30,000.

Let me move on to sporting testimonials. My concern is much the same as that raised by Opposition Front Benchers in relation to the donations to charities that are made as a result of sporting testimonials. There will be a new liability for people receiving money as part of sporting testimonials as long as they are not paid through an employee charitable donation-type method. It is a bit much to expect committees that are set up to have to register themselves in this way to pay the sporting testimonial beneficiary through payroll giving. That is a bit of an over-cumbersome situation. A lot of the people who receive money through sporting testimonials give a significant chunk of it to charities. I am therefore concerned about the reduction in charitable giving that there will be as a result of these changes.

The Government have pretty much said that this has a negligible Exchequer impact, but, once again, an additional administrative burden is being built up. This may stop some of these committees going forward with testimonials if they realise that they have to register for payroll giving and have to pay class 1A national insurance contributions as a result.

**Dr Drew:** The hon. Lady will have heard my earlier intervention. It is not uncommon for people to give very generously when they have a favourite sportsperson. It could happen that someone expects to get £30,000 over the course of a year, yet people are so generous that they give £60,000. Should that be backdated? In other words, if the additional £30,000 could be given to charity, does that impact on the whole amount or the part amount? This what happens in real life; it is not as straightforward as perhaps the Government think.

**Kirsty Blackman:** I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. The liability only arises for testimonials of more than £100,000, but I understand his point. For example, I do not know how it would work if a committee were to receive £80,000 on the day of the sporting testimonial and then another £25,000 afterwards in charitable donations. I hope that the Minister will make plain which period the income from a sporting testimonial covers. If the income arises after the sporting testimonial, does it breach the £100,000 cap, and would the liability for class 1A contributions therefore arise, even though it did not occur on the day of the sporting testimonial?

There is also a difference between contractual and non-contractual sporting testimonials. The hon. Member for Oxford East (Anneliese Dodds) made this incredibly clear in Committee and discussed in some detail the definition of “contractual”. The issue is not only the word “contractual”, but whether a sporting testimonial was expected. For example, if everybody who plays centre forward for a football club is given a sporting testimonial, does that mean that everybody should expect a sporting testimonial, or does it just happen that the last five people who played centre forward were amazing at scoring goals and therefore received a sporting testimonial? My concern is that people who did not expect a sporting testimonial will end up, through no fault of their own, in a situation where the Government consider it to be one that they expected to get.

My concern in both cases is the impact on HMRC, which will have a job of work to do in deciding whether the sporting testimonial income creates liability for class 1A contributions. Is it a contractual testimonial? Is it one that the sportsperson should have expected to receive? That will be a difficult set of cases for HMRC to deal with, to come to the correct decisions.

New clause 4 simply says:

“The Secretary of State must, within three years of this Act receiving Royal Assent, lay before Parliament a report on its Exchequer impact.”

Before a Treasury Bill comes before Parliament, explanatory notes and a TIIN—a tax information and impact note—are provided, which we all are able to access. A TIIN projects how much the Treasury expects to receive as a result of tax changes, whether it is a tax relief or an additional tax. I have pushed Ministers before on how we know whether the expected impact was actually received.

The information that I was given in Committee was not as strong as I hoped for. I understand that at an unspecified point in the future, the Treasury Committee will be given a report on the Exchequer impact of tax changes. I do not know who keeps track of when those reports are published or whether a report is provided to the Treasury Committee on all measures that have an Exchequer impact. However, I do know that the Members who serve on the Bill Committee—whether Opposition or Government Members—and who scrutinise the Bill, raise questions about its progress and ask questions about the potential Exchequer impact do not get a copy of the report. Only the Treasury Committee gets a copy of the report and has the right to scrutinise it.
If the Government cannot accept new clause 4—it would be nice if they did, so that a report was laid before Parliament that we could all see—I ask that when reports are published and sent to the Treasury Committee, all Members who serve on the Bill Committee also receive a copy. It would not be a massive administrative burden on the Treasury to ensure that we were all emailed a copy; I am not even asking for a paper copy. It would mean that Parliament and the Government’s decisions were more transparent. It would also mean that the next time we were asked to take a decision on national insurance contributions or anything else, we could look back at whether the impact that the Exchequer projected was actually received.

I get that there are various reasons why we change taxation. We can change taxation to discourage behaviour that we do not want, to encourage behaviour that we do want, to raise revenue or, as the Government say they want, to encourage behaviour that we do not want, to encourage behaviour that we do not want, to encourage behaviour that we do not want, to encourage behaviour that we do not want, to encourage behaviour that we do not want. We can change taxation to discourage behaviour that we do not want, to encourage behaviour that we do want, to raise revenue or, as the Government say they want, to encourage behaviour that we do not want, to encourage behaviour that we do not want, to encourage behaviour that we do not want, to encourage behaviour that we do not want, to encourage behaviour that we do not want.

The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury (Robert Jenrick):

I am grateful for the opportunity to respond to the comments and questions posed by the hon. Members for Aberdeen North (Kirsty Blackman) and for Bootle (Peter Dowd). I shall not detain the House long, but I will try to respond to as many points as possible. I am surprised that the hon. Member for Bootle has raised those concerns and indicated that he intends to vote against this measure, given that he did not divide the House on Second Reading and did not divide the Committee on a single clause.

Peter Dowd:

I indicated at the time that we would reserve our judgment and see whether the Government came up with sensible proposals. The fact of the matter is that, regrettably, they have yet again not come up with those suggestions, proposals, recommendations and explanations. That is why. Here we are giving the Government the benefit of the doubt, and we are being criticised for it.

Robert Jenrick:

Let me respond to the amendments tabled by the hon. Gentleman and the hon. Member for Aberdeen North. It is a bit like groundhog day, because we have been through these arguments before. I will first address new clauses 1 and 2, which seek to amend the legislation that deals with termination awards, and then new clause 5.

New clauses 1 and 2 seek to commit the Government to report to Parliament on the impact of the changes to termination awards legislation within one year of implementation. They both seek further information on the impact of this measure on individuals whose contracts have ended and on employers. New clause 1 also asks specifically about distributional analysis, while new clause 2 asks the Government to consider the impact on businesses using termination payments to fund a start-up—a matter that we also discussed in Committee.

First, the Government consider that producing such reports is unnecessary, because we have already considered these issues in detail as part of the policy development and extensive consultation process. As we have discussed on a number of occasions, this Bill has been known about for some time. It was published for the first time in 2015. It has been restated in Budgets. It has been consulted on. This is not a new measure; it is well known to individuals and stakeholders who might be affected and to the tax and professional community who will be involved in advising businesses. There is little more to be said on that.

Kirsty Blackman:

As the Minister has said, we discussed this in Committee, as well as on Second Reading. As we have discussed it before and he knew this question was coming, can he tell us how many businesses use termination payments for their start-up and how many fewer will use it for their start-up as a result of these changes?

Robert Jenrick:

As I said in answer to the hon. Lady in Committee, that is not information that HMRC collects. Studies are made by independent bodies, some of which I highlighted to her during the previous stage of the Bill. I could direct her to them, but I cannot vouch for the veracity of those studies, which are produced by independent bodies. Of course, there is anecdotal evidence of the number of start-ups created in the event of significant redundancies at particular businesses, but that is not something HMRC collects or would be able to do easily. With great respect to the hon. Lady and the point she is trying to make, I do not agree that that is something we should attempt to do in this case.

The point the hon. Lady raised in her closing remarks was about the review that HM Treasury does in the ordinary course of business. We do intend to do that, and we do so within three to five years of Royal Assent to a Bill. As I explained in Committee, the conclusions on the Bill will be communicated publicly to the Treasury Committee. I understand the point she has made on a number of occasions that we could at that point specifically notify certain Members of this House should they be in this House and remain interested. However, again with respect, I suggest it is perfectly reasonable that we send that to the Treasury Committee, which will publish it. It will be in the public domain, and if she or other right hon. and hon. Members are interested at that stage, they will be able to view it and take it from the Treasury Committee website.

Kirsty Blackman:

Could the Minister please let us know whether that will be in three years’, five years’ or two years’ time, or at what point in that two-year period should I be watching the Treasury Committee’s website?

Robert Jenrick:

I cannot tell the hon. Lady that at the present time, and for good reason. We do not know at this moment when will be an appropriate time to review this particular tax. Clearly, it can take time to gather the correct evidential base, and that will vary from tax to tax. We will choose the correct moment when we have the greatest degree of evidence to make an informed decision, but it will be within the three-to-five year window.
The existing processes I have described allow time for the Government to consider an adequate amount of evidence, including administrative and taxpayer data. These do take time to collect. They often involve external research, stakeholder views and other relevant analysis. After one year, as is proposed in new clauses 1 and 2, is rarely the appropriate time to review a new tax. Accepting these new clauses at this stage would mean rushing into reviewing these polices prematurely, without proper consideration and without enough evidence to do so robustly, which is what I think all right hon. and hon. Members would wish us to do.

Secondly, the Government have already explicitly considered the impact on employers and individuals as part of this policy development and the consultation process I have already outlined. We decided on an approach that protected those losing their jobs—for example, by retaining the important £30,000 exemption. We have stressed on a number of occasions throughout the passage of the Bill that the Government certainly have no intention of changing that. Were this or a future Government to do so, it would require an affirmative statutory instrument, which could then be debated and voted on by the House. We have also chosen not to change employee national insurance contributions as well, which we could have done for even greater simplification. We chose not to do so to protect employees in a difficult period in their working lives.

At this point, I would add that this policy has been costed. That was certified by the independent Office for Budget Responsibility, and the methodology for this assessment is described in the Budget policy costing document. The suggestion from the hon. Member for Bootle that this was not properly costed is not correct; it has been independently certified.

New clause 1 also requests that the Government conduct a distributional analysis. As I have set out on a number of occasions, the Government have already assessed the distributional impacts of this policy using the information that is available to us. We are confident that the termination awards affected by these changes will be disproportionately paid by higher and additional rate taxpayers. It will not be possible to make a further assessment until we have collected the administrative data on the impact of this policy, which we will do in due course, and it will of course inform the review we have already described in three to five years’ time.

New clause 2 asks that we consider the impact on start-ups. I have answered the question from the hon. Member for Aberdeen North: we do not hold this data. It is not an easy statistic to collect. It requires tracking the behaviour of an individual across time and between different employments.

I would like to say a few words about new clause 5. The proposed clause would require the Government to report every two years on the impact of the changes to termination awards, and on the number and size of the awards. To start with, I want to be clear that the Government have already assessed the impact of the policy in compliance with our duties under the Equality Act 2010. The conclusions to this were published as part of the tax information and impact note.

I will highlight a couple of the important points. First, as the House will know, we explicitly chose not to target individuals—by maintaining an unlimited employee NICs exemption, despite pressure fully to align income tax and NICs. As a result, no individual will see their NICs bill increase as a result of the reforms this Bill makes to termination awards.

Secondly, no groups are explicitly targeted by this provision, which affects all groups identically in legal terms. It will apply equally to all termination awards, regardless of whether it relates to someone with a protected characteristic under the Equality Act.

Finally, of the termination awards that are affected, the key finding of the assessment we have done—this answers the point made by the hon. Member for Bootle—is in fact that it will disproportionately affect men, rather than women. This is a consequence of the fact that, unfortunately, in the present labour market higher earners are of course disproportionately male. I do not think that there is any evidence to suggest that this measure will disproportionately affect women or, indeed, pregnant women.

It is worth re-emphasising that only about 1% of employees receive a termination award each year, and about 80% of these will remain completely unaffected as they do not exceed the £30,000 threshold. We anticipate that those who are affected will be higher or additional rate taxpayers, and that they will be within the top one or two income deciles. It is also worth noting that since 2017—if not even further back than that, but certainly since 2017—the Government have not received any representations from stakeholders regarding any disproportionate impact on protected groups.

If I may, I will speak, finally, on termination awards—[Interruption.] You are gesturing that you would like me to wind up my remarks, Mr Deputy Speaker. New clause 3 and amendment 1 seek to commit the Government to report to Parliament on the impact of the changes on sporting testimonials. This matter was debated comprehensively in Committee. First, we expect there to be a very limited impact on sporting testimonials and charitable giving linked to this practice. I set out in Committee that we do not anticipate that there will be any material change to charitable giving so long as the individual concerned chose to make use of payroll giving, which we hope and expect them to do.

Secondly, we have already subjected this measure to very detailed consultation, including on both the initial proposals and the draft legislation. I can reassure the House that my officials and I stay in close contact with the charitable sector, particularly with its main representative body, the Charity Tax Group. Were any issues to arise in the future, we would of course listen to those, but we do not anticipate that being the case.

With the reassurances that I have been able to give and the further evidence provided throughout the course of the Bill, I hope that right hon. and hon. Members will consider not pressing their new clauses and the amendment.

Peter Dowd: We will push new clause 5, but I beg to ask leave to withdraw new clause 1.

Clause, by leave, withdrawn.
New Clause 5

**Effect of termination awards provisions**

“(1) The Treasury must publish reviews of whether the payment of Class 1A contributions on termination awards under sections 1 and 2 has had—
   (a) any effect on the number of termination awards made above £30,000;
   (b) any effect on the size of termination awards made above £30,000; or
   (c) a disproportionate effect on—
      (i) women,
      (ii) pregnant women,
      (iii) persons aged 50 or over, or
      (iv) any other group of people with protected characteristics (within the meaning of the Equality Act 2010).

(2) The first review under subsection (1) shall be published no later than 24 months after this section comes into force.

(3) Subsequent reviews under subsection (1) shall be published no later than 24 months after publication of the previous review.”—(Peter Dowd.)

This new clause would provide for a general review of the termination awards provisions of this Act within every period of 24 months.

Bought up, and read the First time.

*Question put. That the clause be read a Second time.*

*The House divided: Ayes 214, Noes 273.*

**Division No. 418**

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**Tellers for the Ayes:**

Thangam Debbonaire and Nic Dakin
Question accordingly negatived.

Tellers for the Noes:
Mike Freer and Mr Alister Jack

Mr Alister Jack
7.32 pm

Robert Jeureick: I beg to move, That the Bill be now read the Third time.

I am grateful to all the right hon. and hon. Members who participated throughout the passage of the Bill, particularly in Committee. I thank the Committee’s Chairs, my hon. Friend the Member for North West Norfolk (Sir Henry Bellingham) and the hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh).

This is a small and narrowly drawn but none the less important Bill that continues the Government’s aim of aligning tax and national insurance contributions where it is right to do so. The Bill aligns the employer national insurance contribution treatment of termination awards and sporting testimonials with the current tax treatment. It also raises about £200 million a year for the public finances.

As I mentioned in previous debates, the Bill has been expected for some time. The measures were first announced at Budget 2015, consulted on thereafter and so have been widely expected and subjected to a great deal of scrutiny. The effect of the changes in the Bill will mean that a 13.8% class 1A employer national insurance charge will be applied to income derived from termination awards and sporting testimonials that are already subject to income tax.

I would like to reiterate my thanks to hon. Members who participated in the debates. I thank my superb officials at HM Treasury and Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs, whose patience and professionalism never ceases to impress me. I commend the Bill to the House.

7.34 pm

Anneliese Dodds (Oxford East) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to speak on behalf of the official Opposition on Third Reading. It is also a pleasure to speak opposite the Exchequer Secretary, who has been left holding the baby no less than three times this evening—understandable, perhaps, given the immense turbulence currently occurring on the Government Benches. I echo his thanks to the officials who have been involved with the Bill and to all those who made so many contributions, particularly in Committee.

As we have said repeatedly, this is a meagre Bill. We have many concerns about it that have not been addressed during its passage and were certainly not addressed this evening. First, on sporting testimonials, we still lack clarity on the scope of the Bill due to its terminological ambiguity. We still do not have any proper projection from the Government with regard to its impact on charitable giving.

On termination payments, we remain deeply concerned that the Bill still leaves the door open to reducing the value of national insurance-free termination payments. As a result of the Bill—the Minister even acknowledged this in his speech just now—we could see a reduction in the amount of NI-free payments going to those who are losing their jobs through secondary legislation. That is completely inappropriate and something we will not accept. The Government themselves have admitted that the measures will exert downward pressure on wages.

There will also be a negative impact on termination payments, because they will be passed on from employers to employees.

There are huge problems with our tax system. They are not dealt with by this thin and meagre Bill. As a result, we will be voting against it on Third Reading.

7.36 pm

Kirsty Blackman: The Bill does not do what the Government set out to do, which is to simplify the tax system. The tax system is not simpler as a result of the changes that are being made. It will be more complicated and companies will have a larger administrative burden. It also reduces wages. I raised concerns about the fact that those who are already at the bottom of the pile will be receiving less in wages as a result of the changes the Government are making. I am happy to vote with the Opposition.

Having said that, I felt that the Committee was good-tempered and we discussed the issues at some length. It was really nice to have an evidence session in Committee. Hopefully, we will move on to the Finance Bill Committee taking evidence so that we can have more informed debates.

Finally, I would like to thank a couple of our staff members who have been involved in the progress of the Bill—Emily Cunningham and Chris Mullins-Silverstein—for their work in supporting us. My speeches would have been much less informed if it had not been for their help and support.

Question put, That the Bill be now read the Third time.

Division No. 419] [7.37 pm

A YES

Adams, Nigel
Afriyie, Adam
Aldous, Peter
Amess, Sir David
Andrew, Stuart
Argar, Edward
Atkins, Victoria
Bacon, Mr Richard
Badenoch, Mrs Kemi
Baker, Mr Steve
Barclay, rh Stephen
Baron, Mr John
Bebb, Guto
Beresford, Sir Paul
Berry, Jake
Blackman, Bob
Bone, Mr Peter
Bottomley, Sir Peter
Bowie, Andrew
Bradley, Ben
Braverman, Suella
Breerton, Jack
Briginshaw, Andrew
Brine, Steve
Bruce, Fiona
Buckland, Robert
Burghart, Alex
Burns, Conor
Burt, rh Alistair
Cairns, rh Alun
Campbell, Mr Gregory
Cartledge, James
Cash, Sir William
Caulfield, Maria
Chalk, Alex
Chishti, Rehman
Churchill, Jo
Clark, Colin
Clark, rh Greg
Clarke, rh Mr Kenneth
Clarke, Mr Simon
Cleverly, James
Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
Coffey, Dr Thérèse
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
Dinenage, Caroline
Djanogly, Mr Jonathan
Docherty, Leo
Donaldson, rh Sir Jeffrey M.
Donelan, Michelle
Double, Steve
Dowden, Oliver

A Y E S

Dowden, Oliver
Afriyie, Adam
Aldous, Peter
Amess, Sir David
Andrew, Stuart
Argar, Edward
Baker, Mr Steve
Barker, Mr Peter
Bottomley, Sir Peter
Bowie, Andrew
Bradley, Ben
Braverman, Suella
Breerton, Jack
Briginshaw, Andrew
Brine, Steve
Bruce, Fiona
Buckland, Robert
Burghart, Alex
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Crabb, rh Stephen
Crouch, Tracey
Davies, Chris
Davies, David T. C.
Davies, Glyn
Davies, Mims
Davies, Philip
Dinenage, Caroline
Djanogly, Mr Jonathan
Docherty, Leo
Donaldson, rh Sir Jeffrey M.
Donelan, Michelle
Double, Steve
Dowden, Oliver

The House divided: Ayes 270, Noes 207.
NI Contributions (Termination Awards and Sporting Testimonials)

10 JUNE 2019

NI Contributions (Termination Awards and Sporting Testimonials)

Doyle-Price, Jackie
Drax, Richard
Duddridge, James
Duguid, David
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
Ford, Vicky
Foster, Kevin
Frazer, Lucy
Freeman, George
Fysh, Mr Marcus
Garnier, Mark
Gauke, rh Mr David
Ghani, Ms Nusrat
Gibb, rh Nick
Girvan, Paul
Gleed, John
Goodwill, rh Mr Robert
Gove, rh Michael
Graham, Luke
Graham, Richard
Grant, Bill
Grant, Mrs Helen
Gray, James
Grayling, rh Chris
Green, Chris
Green, rh Damian
Greening, rh Justin
Grieve, rh Mr Dominic
Griffiths, Andrew
Hair, Kirstene
Hallon, rh Robert
Hall, Luke
Hammond, rh Mr Philip
Hammond, Stephen
Hancock, rh Matt
Hands, rh Greg
Harper, rh Mr Mark
Harrington, Richard
Harris, Rebecca
Hart, Simon
Hayes, rh Sir John
Heald, rh Sir Oliver
Heappey, James
Heaton-Harris, Chris
Heaton-Jones, Peter
Henderson, Gordon
Herbert, rh Nick
Hinds, rh Damian
Hoare, Simon
Hollingbery, George
Holinrake, Kevin
Hollorbne, Mr Philip
Holloway, Adam
Howell, John
Huddeleston, Nigel
Hughes, Eddie
Hurd, rh Mr Nick
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, rh Mr David
Jones, Mr Marcus
Kawczynski, Daniel
Keegan, Gillian
Kennedy, Seema
Kerr, Stephen
Knight, rh Sir Greg
Kwarteng, Kwasi
Lamont, John
Latham, Mrs Pauline
Leadsom, rh Andrea
Lee, Dr Philip
Lefroy, Jeremy
Leigh, rh Sir Edward
Letwin, rh Sir Oliver
Lewer, Andrew
Lewis, rh Brandon
Lewis, rh Dr Julian
Lidington, rh Mr David
Lopez, Julia
Lrop, Mark
Loughran, Tim
Mackinnay, Craig
Maclean, Rachel
Mak, Alan
Malthouse, Kit
Mann, Scott
Masterton, Paul
Maynard, Paul
McLoughlin, rh Sir Patrick
McPartland, Stephen
McVey, rh Ms Esther
Menzies, Mark
Merriam, Huw
Metcalfe, Stephen
Miller, rh Mrs Maria
Milling, Amanda
Mills, Nigel
Milton, rh Anne
Mitchell, rh Mr Andrew
Moore, Damien
Mordaunt, rh Penny
Morgan, rh Nicky
Morris, Anne Marie
Morris, David
Morris, James
Morton, Wendy
Mundell, rh David
Murray, Mrs Sherry
Neil, 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
Philp, Chris
Pincher, rh Christopher
Poulter, Dr Dan
Prisk, Mr Mark
Purseva, Tom
Quin, Jeremy
Quince, Will
Raab, rh Dominic
Rees-Mogg, Mr Jacob
Robertson, rh Mr Laurence
Robinson, Gavin
Robinson, rh Nick
Rosindell, Andrew
Ross, Douglas
Rowley, Lee
Rudd, rh Amber
Rutley, David
Sandbach, Antoinette
Scully, Paul
Selous, Andrew
Shannon, Jim
Sharma, Alok
Shelbrooke, Alec
Simpson, David
Skidmore, Chris
Smith, Chloe (Proxy vote cast by Jo Churchill)
Smith, Henry
Smith, rh Christian
Smith, Royston
Spelman, rh Dame Caroline
Spencer, Mark
Stephenson, Andrew
Stevenson, John
Stewart, Iain
Stewart, rh Rory
Streeter, Sir Gary
Stride, rh Mel
Stuart, Graham
Sturdy, Julian
Sunak, Rishi
Abrahams, Debbie
Ali, Rushanara
Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena
Amesbury, Mike
Antoniacci, Tonia
Ashworth, Jonathan
Austin, Ian
Bailey, Mr Adrian
Barron, rh Sir Kevin
Beckett, rh Margaret
Benn, rh Hilary
Bettes, Mr Clive
Blackman, Kirsty
Blackman-Woods, Dr Roberta
Brabin, Tracy
Bradshaw, rh Mr Ben
Brown, Alan
Brown, rh Mr Nicholas
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Richard
Cadbury, Ruth
Cameron, Dr Lisa
Campbell, rh Sir Alan
Carden, Dan
Champion, Sarah
Chapman, Douglas
Chapman, Jenny
Charalambous, Bambos
Cherry, Joanna
Coaker, Vernon
Cooper, Julie
Corbyn, rh Jeremy
Coyle, Neil
Crausby, Sir David
Crawley, Angela

Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
Swire, rh Sir Hugo
Syms, Sir Robert
Thomas, Derek
Thomson, Ross
Throup, Maggie
Tohurist, Kelly
Tomlinson, Justin
Tomlinson, Michael
Tracey, Craig
Trevelyan, Anne-Marie
Truss, rh Elizabeth
Tugendhat, Tom
Vaizey, rh Mr Edward
Vara, Mr Shailesh
Vickers, Martin
Villiers, rh Theresa
Walker, Mr Robin
Wallace, rh Mr Ben
Warburton, David
Warman, Matt
Whately, Helen
Wheeler, Mrs Heather
Whittaker, Craig
Whittingdale, rh Mr John
Wiggin, Bill
Williamson, rh Gavin
Wood, Mike
Wragg, Mr William
Wright, rh Jeremy
Zahawi, Nadhim

Tellers for the Ayes: Mr Alister Jack and Mike Freer

NOES

Creagh, Mary
Creasy, Stella
Cruddas, Jon
Cryer, John
Cumnins, Judith
Cunningham, Alex
Cunningham, Mr Jim
Daby, Janet
David, Wayne
Davies, Geraint
De Cordova, Marsha
De Piero, Glorita
Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh
Dodds, Anneliese
Doughty, Stephen
Dowd, Peter
Drew, Dr David
Dromey, Jack
Duffield, Rosie
Eagle, Ms Angela
Eagle, Maria
Edwards, Jonathan
Ellman, Dame Louise
Elmore, Chris
Esterson, Bill
Evans, Chris
Fellows, Marion
Field, rh Frank
Fletcher, Colleen
Flint, rh Caroline
Forbes, Lisa
Fovargue, Yvonne
Foxcroft, Vicky
Frith, James
Furniss, Gill
Tellers for the Noes:

Thangam Debbonaire and Nic Dakin

Question accordingly agreed to.

Bill read the Third time and passed.
Mineworkers’ Pension Scheme

7.49 pm

Grahame Morris (Easington) (Lab): I beg to move, That this House calls on the Government to carry out a review of the existing arrangements for the sharing of the surplus generated by the Mineworkers’ Pension Scheme.

I thank the Backbench Business Committee, under the excellent stewardship of my good and hon. Friend the Member for Gateshead (Ian Mearns), for permitting this important debate. I also take this opportunity to apologise to those retired miners who made the long journey from the coalfield areas in anticipation that the debate would take place last week. Unfortunately, that was impossible owing to Government business.

In March I was honoured to accompany a group of retired miners and MPs from coalfield areas to deliver a petition with more than 100,000 signatures to No. 10 Downing Street calling for a review of the surplus sharing arrangements for the mineworkers’ pension scheme. The petition is the basis on which this debate was called. I thank all those who have campaigned for pension justice for miners and their dependants.

I must declare an interest. Like many miners, my father and grandfathers died prematurely in their 50s, their lives cut short by the industrial diseases prevalent in coalfield communities. While my father never collected his pension, my mother has been left with a reduced widow’s pension from the British Coal Staff superannuation scheme. Every year, thousands of miners face premature death because of the dangerous conditions they toiled in underground many years ago.

Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): My hon. Friend speaks movingly about his family, but he also points to another issue, which is that the Government need to act urgently, otherwise miners and their families, who are obviously getting older, will not benefit from any measures taken.

Grahame Morris: That is an incredibly important point. When I had to apologise to some of the miners from Wales and Yorkshire who travelled down last week, the point was made to me that even in the space of one week—the period by which this debate was delayed—thousands would die.

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing the debate and pay particular tribute to my hon. Friends the Members for Barnsley East (Stephanie Peacock), for Ashfield (Gloria De Piero) and for Blaenau Gwent (Nick Smith) for their work. Does my hon. Friend agree that a key issue is that the widow’s pension is even smaller than many of the miners’ pensions, so we are asking for an uplift from very small figures? If the Government could show some compassion and bring forward these changes, many widows and miners’ children would benefit hugely.

Grahame Morris: Absolutely; that is a key point. I hope those on the Treasury Bench will listen intently to the points made in this debate.

My hon. Friend the Member for Torfaen (Nick Thomas-Symonds) made a point about the number of miners and their dependants who were dying. The mineworkers’ pension scheme annual report shows a dramatic fall in the number of pensions in payment. It has fallen from 175,000 in 2011 to just over 135,000 today. As this indicates, because of the age of the retired miners and their widows—many are now in their 80s or older—they are passing away and the number of beneficiaries is falling dramatically.

I am proud to represent the mining communities of east Durham. We owe a debt of gratitude to our miners. Easington’s pits produced the nation’s wealth and powered the industrial revolution, and the mining industry transformed our landscape. Without coal, many of the colliery villages in Durham would simply not exist.

Where a pit was sunk, workers from all parts of the UK—from Wales, Cornwall, Ireland—would come to work in those collieries. Indeed, at the height of its production, the Durham coalfield alone employed 170,000 miners in the 1920s.

Coalmining remained our primary source of employment until the closure of our last pit in Durham in 1994. The colliery in my village, Murton, ceased production in November 1991. It was a proud industry until relatively recent times. In my opinion, the men who toiled in our pits are heroes—they worked in darkness so that we could live in light—and, in their retirement, they and their widows deserve respect and security.

There are points of agreement that I believe are accepted across the House, including, I hope, on the Treasury Bench and among Government Back Benchers. I think we can all agree that there is value and importance in the guarantee given to the mineworkers’ pension schemes. What is in dispute is the cost of the guarantee. There is no denying that the guarantee has given to those who administer the funds the freedom to make bold investment decisions, which has allowed them to target higher returns on investment. It follows that the guarantor—the Government—should be compensated for the guarantee fairly and proportionately.

This debate is about the cost of that guarantee and whether the £4.4 billion and the ongoing claim to half of all future surpluses can be considered reasonable recompense to the Government for the level of risk they shoulder. In my view, there should be some correlation between the level of compensation and the level of risk.

Sir Kevin Barron (Rother Valley) (Lab): We should recognise that when the increase in the miners’ pension scheme was higher than that in the state benefit scheme, many people in my constituency, because they got more money, did not take the means-tested benefits they were entitled to, so it is not just about surpluses; it is about how much money the scheme saved the state.

Grahame Morris: That is an absolutely relevant point. Other colleagues have referred to the relative pension levels. Ministers often quote the percentage increases, but the average pension payable is £84 a week. That is a paltry sum. I also respectfully point out to the Minister that the Government have never been called upon to make a single payment into the scheme.

Ian Lavery (Wansbeck) (Lab): I refer to my declaration in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests: I am a deferred member of the mineworkers’ pension scheme.
My hon. Friend mentions the fact that British Coal—the National Coal Board—never put a single penny in the scheme. Many people have called this the crime of the century. At the time of the discussions, the projections were that the agreement would raise £2 billion. The Government have taken £4 billion from the miners of this country without putting a single ha’penny back in. Is this not an absolute disgrace?

Grahame Morris: Absolutely. I could not put it any better myself. It is now time to review the surplus sharing arrangements and the level set in 1994 and consider whether the decisions taken then were taken with the best financial advice and in the best interests of miners.

To be fair, the Government have been consistent in their arguments against making changes to the scheme. These arguments are set out in various responses to parliamentary questions and were restated by the Chief Secretary to the Treasury in her response on 14 May to a cross-party letter co-ordinated by my hon. Friend the Member for Blaenau Gwent. I want to summarise the Government’s position because it is important to consider their arguments. The first is that the sharing arrangements work well for beneficiaries; the second that the sharing arrangements provide fair compensation for the Government; and the third that there can be no unilateral arrangements.

The first point is that the sharing arrangements are set out in various responses to parliamentary questions and were restated by the Chief Secretary in her letter to my hon. Friend the Member for Blaenau Gwent, the Chief Secretary said:

“The sharing arrangements have meant beneficiaries enjoy bonus payments worth more than 33% of their index-linked benefits”.

As highlighted in a previous debate by my good and hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley East (Stephanie Peacock), the average payment from the scheme is just £84 a week, and it is a great deal less for widows, many of whom have outlived their husbands by many decades. Our industrial legacy means that many miners, like my father, never reach retirement age. Those who do are often in ill health, and will draw their pensions for fewer years than those who retire from other industries and sectors.

We often talk about deferred wages. When miners made those contributions, week after week and year after year, the expectation was that they and their families would have security in their retirement. After we delivered the Downing Street petition, w Sullivan, a campaigner and former miner, spoke of some widows receiving pensions of “as little as £8.50 a week”.

Emlyn Davies, another campaigner, receives just £57 a week in return for 26 years’ work in the pit: a poverty pension for years of working in damp, dark, dangerous conditions, sacrificing health and wellbeing. Let me say to Conservative Members, and to people watching this debate, that to me it seems offensive to argue that the scheme is working well for beneficiaries when miners and their widows are receiving such a pittance as £8.50, £57, or even £84 a week.

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): The hon. Gentleman is making a powerful speech. He has given some alarming figures. Does he agree that this is not just about security in retirement, but about dignity, and that the Government are not giving dignity to pensioners in the mining industry and their widows?

Grahame Morris: Absolutely. We owe a debt to the miners, and the Government have an obligation to them—a moral obligation. They obviously have the financial resources to discharge that debt, and to give retired miners and their widows and dependants some dignity.

John Grogan (Keighley) (Lab): May I take up my hon. Friend’s point about the moral obligation? Does he remember that when the Prime Minister first stood on the steps of No. 10 Downing Street, she talked about dealing with injustices in our society? Would it not be appropriate if, during her last few weeks in office, she asked officials and Ministers to think again and look at the independent analysis conducted by the National Union of Mineworkers, which suggests that a 90-10 split would be much fairer?

Grahame Morris: Absolutely. I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention, which has pre-empted my further remarks.

I am trying to deal systematically with the Government’s objections to changing the split. The second point made by the Chief Secretary in her letter concerned the question of whether the surplus sharing arrangements represent fair recompense for the Government guarantee. In her letter to my hon. Friend the Member for Blaenau Gwent, she wrote:

“Thank you for also raising your views on the surplus sharing arrangements. I believe that these represent reasonable recompense to the taxpayer, both for the past investment in the Mineworkers Pension Scheme during the industry’s period of public ownership and for the risks they continue to bear through the government guarantee”.

There is no evidence that the current sharing arrangements can be considered fair or reasonable. Incredibly, the scheme was established, and the surplus sharing arrangements agreed, without any actuarial advice, as confirmed in written answers given to my hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley East.

We know a lot more about the mineworkers’ pension scheme and the associated risks that it faces than we did in 1994. If the 50-50 split represented the risk in 1994, 25 years later the risk to the Government is marginal. After a quarter of a century, they have never made a single contribution to the fund.

In the context of efforts to set a fair sharing arrangement, the Minister will be aware of two reports commissioned by the National Union of Mineworkers. I thank the NUM, and Chris Kitchen and his executive, for that. The two reports were produced by First Actuarial, and dealt with the Government guarantee and the surplus sharing arrangement.

One of the reports suggested that a 90-10 split of future surpluses would be a fair return to the Government for the relatively low level of risk taken in providing the guarantee. The schemes have been tested, and I point out that they weathered the 2008 world financial crash without any need to fall back on the guarantee. I implore the Government to use that report as a basis for negotiation—or rather renegotiation—which can deliver for all interested parties.
Mr Skinner: I did happen to work down a coalmine and I am using the bit of expertise that I had regarding the coalmines, as opposed to being a Member of Parliament. I am trying to demonstrate something to my hon. Friend the Member for Eastington (Grahame Morris) and to ask whether he will look at this. When I worked in the pit the miners themselves—700,000 of them—did not have a pension at all. In fact it was not until the early ’60s that it was decided that the management had a pension, the deputies had a pension and it was time that the miners had a pension as well. That is what I am trying to demonstrate and I am hoping that my hon. Friend will refer to it. Thank you very much.

Madam Deputy Speaker: It is a pleasure. I must say that we are not creating a precedent here for the Chair allowing a very long intervention. Given the hon. Gentleman’s very specific position and long experience on this matter I have stretched things a bit, but that does not mean that anyone else will get away with it.

Grahame Morris: I am grateful, Madam Deputy Speaker, and I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Bolsover (Mr Skinner) for his knowledge, input and expertise. Of course the 700,000 miners, and the 170,000 miners in Durham, have built up a huge pension fund. I have asked various parliamentary questions to ascertain the size of that fund, but bear in mind that 50% of the surplus is taken by Government—£4.4 billion—and my understanding is that, when the last of those miners and widows dies, the Government will get everything; not just the surplus, but everything.

Mike Hill (Hartlepool) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend and neighbour for giving way on that point. As he knows, although Hartlepool never had any pits we certainly have mineworkers who served in pits in Durham. Does he agree that the Government are under an even greater obligation because of the sacrifices and industrial diseases that those mineworkers have suffered from, which have shortened their lives in many cases? That makes this an urgent issue for many.

Grahame Morris: Absolutely. This is a poignant time. Just a short while ago it was the anniversary of the disaster at Easington colliery in my constituency, where 81 men were killed in an explosion and two men from
the rescue team. There is blood on the coal. A price was paid and men paid contributions into their pension funds in anticipation that, if their lives were cut short by accident or injury, their widows and dependants would be looked after. The Government are falling short on this. This is an historical debt that the Government must discharge.

Mike Amesbury (Weaver Vale) (Lab): Fred Smith died last week. He was a proud Scotsman and a miner in the Castelford collieries. He died of an industrial-related disease and he leaves a widow, Enid, and a family to care for. He wants justice.

Grahame Morris: Absolutely. A dear friend of mine, Myrtle McPherson, an absolute stalwart and a legend in Easington, died just a few days ago. These people should have justice. She was loved in that community and worked tirelessly. Her husband Gordon died prematurely of pneumoconiosis. There is a time pressure here and the Government and Ministers really must act.

Caroline Flint (Don Valley) (Lab): I know lots of Members wish to speak in the debate but I will give way one more time and then conclude.

Caroline Flint: I thank my hon. Friend for giving way. Does he agree that, given that these surpluses are essentially a windfall to Government, at the very least, we should have greater transparency in knowing what that money is actually spent on? Does he also agree that it is rather odd that the Treasury budgets to spend this money but claims it is not a sound or firm amount of money that it can count on? Does he think that the Treasury has questions to answer on that front?

Grahame Morris: I am rather alarmed that the Treasury uses some of the surpluses from the miners’ pension funds and says that money is being recycled into regeneration in coalmining areas. Surely the money that miners paid—miners such as my father, grandfather and uncles no longer with us—was deferred wages; it was for their benefit in their retirement, which they never got a chance to enjoy, or for their widows and other miners, not to be used as regeneration funds.

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Con): As a Member of Parliament whose paternal grandfather was a coalminer and whose major curbarition in my seat is called Coalville, I think the hon. Gentleman will know whose side I am on in this debate. Does he agree that, given that the vast majority of retired coalminers and their widows still reside in the coalmining communities in which they worked, and some of them died, any increase in their pension from this over-funded, well-endowed fund will only go back to enrich the communities in which they have lived and worked all their lives and it would be a good investment for the Government?

Grahame Morris: It is not often that I agree with the hon. Gentleman, but, absolutely, those people are certainly not going to be buying yachts and making investments in offshore tax havens. They are going to be spending that money in the local economy and supporting local businesses.

Several hon. Members rose—

Grahame Morris: I shall now conclude, otherwise I will incur the wrath of Madam Deputy Speaker.

Our miners have served our country. They have served it loyally. They have toiled in the most dangerous and challenging working conditions imaginable. The contributions that miners have made to the wealth of our country was captured by George Orwell in his essay “Down the Mine” and I just want to read some lines from it:

“Our civilization...is founded on coal, more completely than one realizes until one stops to think about it. The machines that keep us alive, and the machines that make machines, were all directly or indirectly dependent upon coal.”

The importance of coal may have declined, but our gratitude to the miners should never wane and we owe them a debt of honour. Miners and their widows deserve better than poverty pensions. I am asking the Minister to end the pension theft and allow miners and their widows a better quality of life in retirement in their remaining years. Renegotiate the existing pension sharing arrangements. Do the right thing, Minister, and give the miners the money back that they have already earned.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. We will have to start with a time limit of seven minutes.

8.18 pm

Ben Bradley (Mansfield) (Con): It is good to have the opportunity to speak in this debate, and it is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Easington (Grahame Morris), who raised some important points and set out a measured and non-partisan case, which is exactly what is required in this discussion.

I am proud to represent Mansfield and Warsop in Parliament. For most of the 20th century, mining was the most important industry and my constituency still has a proud coalmining heritage. It still dominates many aspects of our area and I have been working on the miners’ pension scheme since I was elected. I have regularly met with the miners’ pension campaign team and constituents affected by this important issue. I have held meetings with Ministers and trustees to help to lobby for changes to the terms of the scheme. This has been a very frustrating process; we have been through so many Ministers now, explaining and making the case each time. In March, I was pleased that the former Minister met a delegation, including Les Moore and my constituent Mick Newton, who has been a brilliant local campaigner on this issue in Mansfield. Mick, alongside campaigners including Trevor Cooke and many others, has been lobbying on the issue for many years.

I recognise—as do the Ministers with whom I have had this discussion—that the Government have done far better out of this scheme than they ever imagined when it was first agreed. The arrangement that was settled back in the 1990s saw the UK Government acting to guarantee the scheme and all pensions in cash terms in return for a 50% share of future services. It is important to recognise the importance of the Government guarantee and the protection it has provided to former miners. It means that the trust has been able to invest with security, and it has done incredibly well with those
I am curious to understand what the hon. Gentleman has just said. He thinks that now is the time for the scheme to be tipped in favour of the miners, but what about before?

Ben Bradley: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that, but I think it was a fairly pointless question. I am not in a position to go back and change the past. I am here in this Chamber talking about now.

The Government have had far more income from the scheme than they ever imagined. Many of the beneficiaries who are still with us are increasingly suffering with industry-related health conditions and are in need of support. It would be relatively simple for the Government to shift the balance, perhaps by offering a 70-30 split or going even further. The risk to the Government and the taxpayer is not what it was in 1994. We can split hairs about when the right time to do this might have been, and it was probably several years ago, but we are here now and we are talking about it.

Colleagues have gone into great detail about the costs and benefits of changing the balance. I have sought to do so previously with Ministers, but I feel that the best advocates for the change are the mineworkers themselves. That is why I have sought to get them together with campaigners, trustees and the Government to discuss this. I believe it is now time for the Government to undertake a formal review of the arrangements and consider the case for reform in proper detail.

Former coalfield communities are among the poorest in the country, and older people in particular struggle to make ends meet without savings and without much support beyond their pension arrangements. These coalfield communities are among the hardest working and longest suffering in our country, as the hon. Member for Easington said. The miners worked in darkness so that we could have light and, although much of that happened before I was born, I have every respect for those constituents in my community who worked incredibly hard to look after the rest of us and to ensure that we could have the quality of life that we expected.

Ensuring that miners can keep more of the surplus from these investments will have a life-changing effect. Many of them are on low incomes and it would help to boost their lives individually while they are still around to spend that money. It would also help to boost whole communities, such as mine in Mansfield and Warsop. As my hon. Friend the Member for North West Leicestershire (Andrew Bridgen) said, more money in miners’ pockets in communities such as Mansfield is money that will be reinvested back into those deprived communities and help to boost them.

Some have suggested an increased guarantee as a compromise to cover the scheme’s bonuses, but although that sounds nice—and sounds like Government doing something—it will not put any extra money into the pockets of those miners. It would merely guarantee what they already get. We have already seen that the risk of needling that guarantee is very small, so I do not think that is good enough. This is a chance for the Government to show that we are on the side of people who have worked hard and paid into the system, and that we will help them. To me, that is what the Conservative party should be about, so I hope that the new Minister and his Department will work alongside the Treasury and the trustees to review the scheme and to ensure that the hard-working miners who gave so much to their communities, including in Mansfield, will receive their fair share. I look forward to discussing this with him further.

Edward Miliband (Doncaster North) (Lab): I am glad to follow the hon. Member for Mansfield (Ben Bradley); it is good that there is all-party support for this debate. I want to congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Easington (Grahame Morris) on his brilliant speech and on setting out his case so eloquently. I am speaking in this debate because I want to see justice for the retired miners in my constituency of Doncaster, North and, indeed, across Doncaster and the whole country. Miners worked their backs off for this country at great cost to themselves, often causing themselves ill health and a shortened life expectancy. Their families watched their loved ones risk their lives for this country, and the least we owe them is fairness and justice, which is what this debate is about.

As my hon. Friend said, the average payment under the scheme is just £83.98 per week—around £4,000 a year—so we are talking about people for whom every pound will make a difference. It cannot be right that £4 billion—and counting—has gone to the Government and not to the miners. That does not seem fair or right, and I think that is recognised across the House. My hon. Friend and the hon. Gentleman have spoken eloquently to the current injustice, and the hon. Gentleman said that if we look at the scheme now, it just does not seem fair. The specific and relatively brief point I want to make is actually about the past, because if the scheme does not seem right now, I think we have strong grounds for thinking that it was not right in 1994 either, when the original decision was made. That might look like a matter of historical detail, but I do not think it is. We are where we are now because of that decision, which Governments of both parties have abided by.

I am particularly grateful for the conversations I have had with my constituent Les Moore, whom the hon. Gentleman mentioned, and his organisation, the UK Miners Pension Scheme for Justice and Fair Play Association, which, along with the NUM, has toiled on this issue for years. The 50-50 split was decided and announced in April 1994, and we all know what happens when a decision like that is made: inertia sets in. The Treasury is getting billions of pounds as a result, and nobody wants to revisit the matter. No Chancellor, Conservative or Labour, wants to give up that amount of money. But what was the basis of that original decision? Remarkably, it is 25 years old and we still do not really know the basis for it.

I want to pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley East (Stephanie Peacock), because she asked the most material question of all to the Minister last year. She asked the Government to publish the
actuarial advice on which the surplus sharing arrangements were made. As my hon. Friend the Member for Easington said, the reply was, extraordinarily, that no such advice was obtained. If there was no actuarial advice behind a decision that had billions of pounds-worth of implications for hundreds of thousands of miners and their families, that really was negligence of the highest order.

The more closely we look at this decision, the more dubious it becomes. A document from September 1993 was released under a freedom of information request in 2016. It is a report carried out by the Government Actuary, and it is the closest document that anyone can find that is relevant to the time. It is not about the future arrangements, but it does talk about the current practice at the time and implies that at that point miners were enjoying not 50% of the surplus but 70%. So the question then arises: if 70% was the basis of the scheme then, why did it change to 50%? We just do not know the answer to that question.

My point about the history is that Governments of both parties have said that the decision was properly made in 1994, but the increasing evidence is that the decision was not properly made at the time. I have a simple request to the Minister, which is that he should publish the papers underlying the decision that was made in 1994. Then we could all see for ourselves for the first time how and why the decision was reached and what has changed since then. My simple belief is that the decision was not fair then and that it is not fair now. Miners gave so much to our country and we need to repay our debt to them. On that basis, and on the basis of the case set out by my hon. Friend, I believe that it is high time the Government launched a review so that there can be justice for my constituents and for tens of thousands of mineworkers and their families.

8.28 pm

Bill Grant (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for Doncaster North (Edward Miliband). My constituency covers what was formerly known as National Coal Board Scotland west area—a thriving mining community in its day—and this is one of a series of debates brought over the years in a bid to seek a fairer distribution of the surplus from the mineworkers’ pension scheme. The scheme was, in effect, divided into four sub-funds—the guarantee fund, bonus augmentation, guarantors, and investment reserve—with it being possible to vire moneys between some sub-funds, as appropriate, but the bonus augmentation fund is an exception, because there is no provision by which to make up any shortfall. The mineworkers’ total pension payable is protected, rises in line with inflation, and does not fall in cash terms.

There has been a long history of reasonable and fair requests for changes from former mineworkers, their widows, the Coalfield Communities Campaign and many others, including myself, whose relatives were miners. In my case, my father, my father in law and many other family members were miners. We empathise with those who served in the pits and who are seeking a pension commensurate with the daily dangers that they encountered at the coalface.

Luke Graham (Ochil and South Perthshire) (Con): My hon. Friend makes a good point about some of the dangers that coalminers faced at the coalface. In Clackmannanshire, which I represent, we still see not only the dangers that they faced back at the time, but the legacy and the long-term health impacts. Does he agree that it is time to review the fund and its distribution and that we should set regular reviews with actuarial advice to ensure that the distribution is fair and equitable in both good times and bad?

Bill Grant: My hon. Friend makes a valid point. Those who were colliers or miners can become victims of silicosis and pneumoconiosis—common names in my household and my father’s—which affect the respiratory system. This group of people deserve a review that favours them. Many miners unfortunately go on to develop ill health later in life, which can often be attributed to the conditions in which they worked underground.

The men who wrought hard, as we say in Scotland, in the bowels of the earth to put the “Great” in Great Britain fuelled the industrial revolution and kept the home fires burning through two world wars. It is worthy of note that the Labour party agreed to consider their concerns, but it found itself unable to do so as far back as 2003, due to a fall in world stock markets, so the original 50-50 share of the surplus prevailed. Even with the passage of time, it is clear that that unpredictability remains, given the immense dependency on the behaviour of money markets and the return from stock exchanges. It is essential to take a risk-based approach to ensuring that any Government, as the guarantor, are robust in securing and maintaining funding for the future.

The contingent pension liability for British Coal’s two pension schemes was valued at the modest sum of approximately £16 million. Some argue that recent surpluses need to be balanced against previous deficits, but I am unsure whether I would support such an approach. It was reported that there was a large surplus in the guarantee fund in 2017, with half being destined to provide bonuses to pensioners. The trustees announced new bonuses representing an increase equivalent to 4.2% of guaranteed pensions in the six years to 2023. In addition, there were to be improved benefits, and quite rightly so, for members under 60 who were not yet retired but who were experiencing serious ill health from spending decades underground. Such modest moves are to be welcomed, as is the coalfield communities fund that assists some of those communities.

In 2018, the Minister for Energy and Clean Growth instructed her officials to liaise with the pension fund’s trustees with a view to considering revising the scheme for the benefit of all parties. Earlier this year, she advised that that was ongoing, so this evening I ask the Minister to endeavour to expedite the review, given the increasing age and ill health of many miners, to achieve any necessary adjustments to meet the earlier stated principle of a fair and equitable sharing of risk and, more importantly, reward in the interests of both scheme members and the Government. Finally, I hope that the review will look kindly on the remaining miners and their widows and afford them the financial dignity that they so richly deserve.
Gloria De Piero: It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock (Bill Grant) and to see cross-party consensus around the need for change. I also congratulate the Backbench Business Committee on selecting this extremely important subject for debate.

I have been campaigning on the mineworkers’ pension scheme for some years alongside my hon. Friends from other coalfield communities and with both the National Union of Mineworkers and, crucially, the trustees of the pension scheme. We are all united in and committed to our goal of achieving a fairer pension for the thousands of former mineworkers and their widows who have stood by in dismay as the Government’s coffers swelled with billions of pounds made on their pension investments.

In answer to parliamentary questions, the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy has admitted, in its role as guarantor of the mineworkers’ pension scheme, that the Government have received nearly £4.5 billion since 1994. They have never had to pay a penny into the scheme. Even now, they expect to receive around £142 million a year from the scheme surpluses—a truly eye-watering figure. No wonder there is a huge amount of anger and resentment in mining communities because of it. The phrase I hear from many ex-miners in Ashfield is, “The Government is taking our money.”

Some people think ex-miners have a fantastic pension that is the envy of those on pensions from other traditional industries, but the truth, as my hon. Friends have said, is that the MPS pension is worth not much more than £80 a week. The truth is that many ex-miners and their widows are on a very limited income and struggle to make ends meet. That is some thanks for the back-breaking work these men did literally to keep the country’s lights on.

The conditions in which miners worked were uncomfortable at best and downright dangerous at worst. Keith Stanley, whom I know well, worked at the coalface in Nottinghamshire for 35 years, and he describes what it was like for miners down the pit: digging in narrow tunnels, just four feet tall at most; coal raining in on them regularly; travelling for an hour underground just to reach the coal seam before doing a shift; and grafting in hot and dirty conditions that most of us could not imagine.

Men were transferred to neighbouring collieries when the pits began to close, but when places ran out as more and more mines shut down, too many of them were tossed aside, left to find work in local factories or as manual labourers if they were lucky. Now approaching retirement, many of them do not have the pension they hoped for and watch in dismay while money made from their pension investments is pocketed by the Treasury.

Keith told me that this injustice has always grated on him and that the oft-repeated Government line that the MPS pension is worth not much more than £80 a week is simply not true. The truth is that many ex-miners and their widows are on a very limited income and struggle to make ends meet. That is some thanks for the back-breaking work these men did literally to keep the country’s lights on.

The conditions in which miners worked were uncomfortable at best and downright dangerous at worst. Keith Stanley, whom I know well, worked at the coalface in Nottinghamshire for 35 years, and he describes what it was like for miners down the pit: digging in narrow tunnels, just four feet tall at most; coal raining in on them regularly; travelling for an hour underground just to reach the coal seam before doing a shift; and grafting in hot and dirty conditions that most of us could not imagine.

Men were transferred to neighbouring collieries when the pits began to close, but when places ran out as more and more mines shut down, too many of them were tossed aside, left to find work in local factories or as manual labourers if they were lucky. Now approaching old age, many of them do not have the pension they hoped for and watch in dismay while money made from their pension investments is pocketed by the Treasury.

Keith told me that this injustice has always grated on him and that the oft-repeated Government line that ex-miners have a good deal leaves him seething. On the contrary, it is the Government who seem to have the good deal. When the guarantee arrangements were first negotiated, it was never forecast that the Government would make so much money from the scheme. They have banked billions more than expected, which is why we are now debating the right thing to do.

Luke Graham: I do not want to break the consensus that is building in the Chamber tonight, but the hon. Lady calls this an injustice and blames the Government. Why, then, did Ministers in the Labour Administration stand at the Dispatch Box in 2001, 2002 and 2003 and refuse to have that review? Why is it okay for Labour Members to call for it now? At least be honest about it.

Gloria De Piero: I accept that and, actually, the negotiations began at the end of the last Labour Government’s term—representatives of the National Union of Mineworkers have told me about the meetings they had in No. 10—but we left office. Will the hon. Gentleman acknowledge the millions that we spent on compensation for industrial injuries and industrial white finger?

Ian Lavery: We are talking about good deals and bad deals, but it is not just about the surplus. Is my hon. Friend aware—I am sure she is—that, when the Government acted as a guarantor in 2002, there was a deficit of £390 million? Then, in 2005, the Government took back that £390 million from the scheme’s funds, plus interest. That amounted to £540 million. Not only that, but they took a further £229 million, which was 50% of the fund’s surplus. Talk about good deals and bad deals. I am sure she totally agrees that this is a bonanza for the Government. It is daylight robbery.

Gloria De Piero: “Bonanza” is right, “cash cow” is right and “injustice” is right when it comes to the mineworkers’ pension scheme.

In a recent letter on this issue, the Treasury referred to the 50-50 split of the surplus sharing arrangement as “reasonable recoupment” for past investment in the MPS. Indeed, the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy has also stated that this arrangement is “in recognition of contributions” that the Government previously made to the scheme.

I ask for some clarity from the Government on this issue, as a recent answer to a written question I posed states that their involvement in the scheme began at privatisation, and we know from previous answers that the Government have not paid into the scheme since privatisation. What past investment or contributions can they still be being recompensed for? If there are none, surely this, along with the fact they have made far more money than expected from the scheme already, justifies the opening of negotiations into reviewing and reducing the surplus sharing arrangement. With such a strong case on such an important issue, though I thank the Backbench Business Committee for giving us time to debate the MPS, it is high time that we had a debate in Government time, with engagement from Ministers, so that we can look at finally righting this historic wrong.

8.40 pm

Stephanie Peacock: It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Ashfield (Gloria De Piero), who has been a long-standing campaigner on this issue. I wish to congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Easting (Grahame Morris) on his passionate speech in opening this debate, and I thank him for it. It is a pleasure to have the opportunity to be here fighting for an issue that matters so much to the lives of many of my constituents in Barnsley East. This debate on the MPS follows my Adjournment debate on the same subject in February, where we discussed the contribution made to this country by miners who toiled...
for decades, and the money the Government have unfairly taken from their pension scheme. Although I am pleased that this debate has been granted—I thank the Backbench Business Committee for selecting it—what we need now is action, not more words.

Since the scheme was established, following the privatisation of British Coal in 1994, the Treasury has pocketed more than £4.4 billion, with nearly half a billion more over the next three years planned. Yet since 1987 the Government have not paid in a single penny, and instead claim their undertaking as guarantor makes this a fair price worth paying. In return, the average retired miner must get by on about £84 a week, while some are forced to settle for much less.

Luke Graham: The hon. Lady is talking about returns. Does she recognise that a 40% return on an investment fund is extraordinary? One does not have to be a City hedge fund manager to understand that. A lot of that is down to the fact that the Government are a guarantor. Does she agree therefore that regular reviews should take place and that the percentage should be variable, based on the performance of the fund, as 50% or 90% of nothing will be nothing for the miners?

Stephanie Peacock: I will come on to talk about what split I think there should be, but I just ask the hon. Gentleman whether he could live on £84 a week. That is what a lot of retired miners in my constituency—

Luke Graham rose—

Stephanie Peacock: I have taken an intervention and I am going to make some progress.

As I was saying, these staggering sums are born out of the 50-50 surplus-sharing arrangement. Let us not forget that, as has already been pointed out in this debate, this agreement was made without any actuarial advice—it is simply staggering. This agreement simply must be reviewed and amended to give miners a greater share of what I believe is fundamentally their money. It is patently unfair that these miners, who powered our country, are left to fight for crumbs off the table.

Leaving aside questions of fairness, the sharing surplus arrangement no longer makes financial sense either. The Government claim the risk they undertake in underpinning the pensions in their role as guarantor justifies this huge price paid and they suggest that without their backing the current value of the pensions would be considerably less. That is certainly up for debate, but what is not is that the landscape has changed drastically since this original agreement was made. For instance, the risk they assumed in 1994 in acting as guarantor has decreased substantially since then. The membership of the scheme alone has fallen considerably, for example. In 2006, there were 280,000 members, whereas there are now fewer than 160,000—by 2026, there will be just 125,000. So the financial risk for the Government has decreased and will continue to do so, yet miners in the scheme are still essentially charged the same price for the guarantee as they were 25 years ago. From a financial perspective, the scheme is no longer proportionate or providing value for money, yet the Government are willing to ignore this in order to continue boosting the coffers of the Exchequer.

On that note, in my previous Adjournment debate the Minister further attempted to justify this income by stating the Government have spent about £1 billion in coalfield communities over the past two decades—but that still leaves billions taken from the miners unaccounted for. Surely, the Government should at least tell us where that money has been spent?

Rather than in the Treasury, money should be in the pockets of retired miners. Along with the scheme trustees, the Government have the authority to make that so, by amending the surplus sharing arrangement, providing genuine value for money and righting this injustice—so will they? Will they, like the Labour party, commit to an immediate review of the current scheme as it stands? As part of that review, will they consider the NUM-commissioned report that suggested a 90-10 split in favour of the miners? Will they meet me, other coalfield MPs and the NUM to discuss that recommendation further? Will they acknowledge that the benefits brought to miners’ pensions by the Government’s guarantee simply no longer provide value for money? These are good, hard-working people who toiled for decades for the good of our country. The Government should put right this wrong and give miners what is rightfully theirs: a decent pension that they have earned and paid for.

8.45 pm

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Easington (Grahame Morris) for securing this important debate about miners’ pensions, and I praise my hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley East (Stephanie Peacock), who made a cracking speech.

This is an important issue for the people of Blaenau Gwent and across the south Wales coalfield. I wish to focus on people I know—people in my family, like my uncle Dessie, and his comrades—and why they need a fairer deal. I need to declare an interest: my family worked in coal and steel, the two industries that drove our industrial revolution and built Great Britain. My great, great grandfather was an iron puddler from Merthyr. It says on my birth certificate that my dad was a labourer at the GKN steelworks in Cardiff. My great grandfather was killed down the pit. My grandfather got crushed under a coal fall at Markham colliery. The three uncles on my mum’s side were colliery. Their stories are important to explain why we need action. I will concentrate on just one of them.

My uncle Dessie Winter started work when he was 15 at the NCB brickyard in Tredegar. After that, he started working underground in the Oakdale colliery, further down the Sirhowy valley, where he spent the next 17 and a half years of his life. He worked there alongside his brother, his brother-in-law and his butties from Ashvale. Several generations of Tredgar families worked at this pit to keep the lights on, the fires burning and our country running. At work, they faced daily dangers: explosions from gas leaks, flooding and, of course, the dust.

Dessie’s generation saw the industry change, from prosperity to the miners strike. Oakdale closed in 1989. Marine colliery, where my uncle Jackie worked, closed the same year. The mines are pretty much all long gone now. The coal industry employed 400,000 people in the year that Dessie started; now, just 700 work in coal, and
there are just 150,000 mining pensioners. The Government’s obligations to Dessie’s comrades and thousands like them have to be met.

When I speak to Dessie about the pension scheme, his first concern is making sure that widows get a fair share. They currently get around two thirds of the pension, but with colliers getting perhaps £84 a week, that fall of around £30 a week is really hard for widows. Dessie paid in for decades and thinks that his wife should get her fair share.

The second thing he talks about is just how much money the Government get from the scheme. The Government guarantee is critical—I do not think anyone will dispute that it is needed—but there is a real question about how much the Government receive in return for it. The current arrangements have netted the Government more than £4 billion since 1994. That is right: pensioners are subsidising the Government. Billions of pounds have been pocketed by the Chancellor without the Treasury making any direct payments into the scheme itself. Dessie feels that the Government are taking the cream off the top of the miners’ money, and who could disagree with him? When I spoke to him recently and asked what his friends from the pit thought about the pension deal, he said, “Nick, there are not so many here now.” Some 6,500 miners passed away last year alone.

The Government have a duty of care to those who are left and to their families for all that they have done. I call on the Minister to do two things to help set things right. First, will the Government implement the proposals that the trustees have made about protecting pension bonuses? That means that miners will have a larger guaranteed pension pot. Secondly, the Government must bring forward a review of the current sharing arrangements, which should consider the Government taking a reduced share, so that more money can go to retired miners and their widows.

Dessie and his generation just want fair play. They have put in decades of physically tough and dangerous work to dig coal and keep the economy going for all of our futures. The Government must repay that debt to them.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. Everyone has been very good at keeping to time, but I will have to reduce the official time to six minutes to make sure that everybody gets a fair chance.

8.50 pm

Danielle Rowley (Midlothian) (Lab): I swear that, for the past few times that I have spoken, the time limit has been reduced just before me, but I do not blame you, Madam Deputy Speaker.

It is truly an honour to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Blaenau Gwent (Nick Smith), who just gave such an emotional and personal speech. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Easington (Grahame Morris) for his speech and for the debate as well.

I am honoured to represent a rich mining community, home to the Lady Victoria Colliery, which was Scotland’s first super-pit, with a workforce of almost 2,000 at its peak. It was nationalised in 1947 by a Labour Government who invested in working class communities. A thriving mining community grew up around this pit in Newtonrchange and in other Midlothian towns which, like many other mining communities, have suffered since the closure of the pits.

The site of the colliery is now home to the National Mining Museum, which is a fantastic museum and events base. It ensures that the role and the national significance of the mining industry and the impact that it had on the lives of those who lived in mining communities are never forgotten, and yet mining communities are being forgotten by this Government. Their voices are being ignored and they are being unfairly and unjustly treated, as we have heard from all parties in this debate today.

We have heard about the average miner’s pension, but some retired miners and their widows are living on roughly £60 a week at the bottom, and that is just disgraceful—absolutely disgraceful. It has also been reported that at least 6,000 ex-miners have had their pensions cut, and that is despite the huge profits that are being made by the Government—an estimated £10 billion over the past 20 years under this current arrangement. At the time of the agreement, it was estimated that the scheme would generate a £2 billion surplus over 25 years, but, as we heard from some of my colleagues, that has been underestimated and there is actually more.

The amount given to ex-miners must be re-evaluated. The Government have been rewarded with huge undeserved sums and, as we have heard today, they are treating the mineworkers’ pension scheme as a cash cow. It was meant to be a safety net for miners, not a money earner for the Government. My hon. Friend the Member for Blaenau Gwent used a phrase that I thought was particularly illuminating. He said that pensioners were subsidising the Government. Is that not disgraceful?

The work of miners in Midlothian and across the country was integral to the development of the wealth of our country. Britain developed in part on the backs of miners, and we have to show our gratitude to them, we absolutely do. The miners’ work was very physically demanding and, as we have heard, it has led to many retirees living with associated health conditions.

I would like to take the chance to pay tribute to the Lothian miners’ convalescent home, Whatton Lodge, in East Lothian for all the work that it does looking after retired miners and their families. It celebrated its 70th anniversary recently. It does great work for miners in Midlothian and across the Lothian area.

I am glad to have been called to speak in this important debate. The hon. Member for Mansfield (Ben Bradley) talked about not even having been born when some of the pits were closed. I think that I just pip him on being a little bit younger. It is so important to have young voices from across the Chamber speak in this debate, because we must ensure that the voices of miners are not lost.

Hugh Gaffney (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (Lab): My hon. Friend is talking about young people. This year in my constituency of Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill, the Auchengeich miners commemorative 60 years since 47 miners died in a fire—paying the real price of coal. Their children grew up fatherless, with no money, and people are still suffering today. That is the real price of coal. The Government should give the money back to the miners.
Danielle Rowley: My hon. Friend is right that this has to be an intergenerational debate. We have to show solidarity with retired miners and their families.

I am so proud to be from a mining community, but also from a mining family. Both my grandfathers were miners. In fact, my granda Ron Curran celebrated his 92nd birthday with me on Saturday, and it was a great event. He always fought for justice for miners, and I continue to do so in his honour.

Andrew Bridgen: The hon. Lady talks about coalfield communities. Does she agree that they are gritty, proud, and among some of the hardest working and most honest communities in the country? These are not communities that expect something for nothing—they worked for everything they got—but what they do expect is what they are due and deserve from their pension fund, which they have worked so hard for.

Danielle Rowley: It has been really good to see the solidarity shown from both sides of the House on this issue. Earlier, the hon. Gentleman mentioned investment in pit areas. Miners typically stay in those areas and invest in them, and not only do retired miners tend to stay in the areas where they worked; they also give so much back. There are some fantastic retired miners and widows of miners in my area, such as Alex Bennett and Margot Russell, who have done amazing work locally and have given so much back. I was going to say that these people should be rewarded, but this is not about giving them a reward; this is about giving them what they worked for, and that is so important.

Ian Lavery: We should not be pleading for the miners to get justice in this Chamber. These are deferred wages. The miners actually put the money in the pot in the first place. From 1987 to 1994, there was a contributions holiday for the National Coal Board that cost £1.2 billion. We are talking about deferred wages that the miners worked for; they paid the money into the bank account out of their own pockets, and here we are pleading for justice.

Danielle Rowley: My hon. Friend is bang on. These are absolutely deferred wages. This is money that belongs to retired miners.

The Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, the hon. Member for Pendle (Andrew Stephenson) has already committed to exploring options on a cross-party basis, but will he commit today to meeting ex-miners, the NUM, pension trustees and Members across the House from mining communities, and then review these arrangements urgently?

We all seem to agree that this arrangement is unfair and unjust, and it seems not to be based on facts or evidence. It cannot be right that the Government are making so much profit and the pensioners are being left with basic allowances. Miners created the wealth, and they should be able to access it for a dignified and well-supported retirement. I echo the calls of hon. Members across the House, and call for an end to this pension theft for retired miners and their families in Midlothian and across the country.

8.59 pm

Gerald Jones (Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney) (Lab): I am pleased to be able to speak in this debate and I thank the Bench Bench Business Committee for bringing it forward.

I really hope that tonight’s debate will give the Government an opportunity to reflect on their position and put right the injustice felt by thousands of former miners in Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney and across the country. We must consider what has been contributed over past decades. Thousands of miners, as we have heard, gave the best years of their lives and worked in dangerous conditions. In many cases they gave their health, and in some cases even their lives, for the coal industry. There can probably be no greater price paid for coal than the Aberfan disaster in my constituency in 1966 when 116 children and 28 adults lost their lives.

My paternal grandfather was killed in Ogilvie colliery in 1944 when he was just 32 and my own father was just one year old. On my mother’s side, my great-uncle was killed in 1962 at Elliot colliery in New Tredegar at just 19 years of age. Sadly, these losses were replicated all too often across the coalfields and over the decades. In addition, hundreds, if not thousands, of miners suffered poor health over many years, including my maternal grandfather, who suffered many years of ill-health due to his many years as a miner.

Carolyn Harris (Swansea East) (Lab): It would be very remiss of me not to mention my predecessor, Siân James, whose early life as a miner’s wife was immortalised on the big screen in the movie “Pride”. It was with Siân that I visited the Gleision mine in September 2011 and looked into the faces of the women who prayed that their men would be returned to them safely. Unfortunately, they were not. Miners have always risked—and, sadly, all too often given—their lives just for doing their job.

Does my hon. Friend agree that those who did survive and reach pensionable age should not now be struggling on a paltry pension while the Government are rewarded with vast sums of money from a scheme that they have not paid a penny into—not a penny?

Gerald Jones: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention and agree with her. She talks about the injustice of this, which I will come on to later. I pay tribute to her for the campaigning work that she has done in Swansea East. I also pay tribute to her predecessor.

Susan Elan Jones (Clwyd South) (Lab): My hon. Friend mentioned some of the disasters that mining communities have faced. I cannot but mention the Gresford disaster in north Wales in which my paternal grandfather lost his life. Clearly, there is a moral case for why the Government need to act on this, but there is also a really good financial case, because we are not talking about that much money. It really is imperative that they act.

Gerald Jones: I agree with my hon. Friend’s comments. The history of our coalfields is littered with examples of the sacrifices that our communities and miners made, and it is important that this is recognised.

In more recent years, conditions improved and so did the terms of employment. The Government acting as guarantors for the scheme in 1994 was the right thing to
Mineworkers’ Pension Scheme

Jo Platt (Leigh) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney (Gerald Jones), and I congratulate the Backbench Business Committee on securing this important debate.

As the MP for a former mining community, I want to begin by stating how proud I am to know and represent the ex-miners and their families in Leigh. They are the pride of our town, and their stories are legendary. The coalmines were the beating heart of our community, and we owe the miners an enormous debt of gratitude for their service to our towns. It is for that reason that their struggle is so heartbreaking. For decades they bravely worked to serve their towns, and now they feel we have let them down. Some feel they have been exploited, and many are angry that they have not been given the respect and support they feel they have earned.

To treat former miners and their communities in the way they have been treated in the past few years, while reaping more than £4.4 billion for the Government coffers, is the height of disrespect. The £4.4 billion that the Government have received should have been used to invest in the miners’ towns, give them a high standard of living and ensure that their health and finances were fit to give them the dignity in retirement that they deserve.

Jo Platt: I will not, because I know that a few Members are waiting to speak, and we are short of time.

The sad reality is that the miners have faced real hardship and neglect. Their finances have not been protected, with hundreds of cases of miners and their families living in poverty after their retirement, and their health has been endangered. Communities like Leigh have not been given the investment they deserve to keep our economy and society strong after the pits closed.

Towns like Leigh were once the beating heart of the country, but after decades of neglect, Leigh is at the bottom of the social mobility rankings, without the resources to rebuild its economy. The truth is that our post-mining community are not asking for much. They are not asking for some lavish lifestyle—they just want what they deem to be rightly theirs, but every step of the way they have had to fight tooth and nail for the healthcare, pensions and respect that should have been granted.

Andrew Bridgen: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Jo Platt: I am sorry, but I am not going to give way.

If it were not for brave and relentless fighters like Colin Rooney, who campaigns on behalf of the south Lancashire coalfield, we would never have the incredible campaigning force that we see today, which deserves enormous respect. Anyone who speaks to our ex-miners knows that they give it to you straight, and when they see injustice, they do not stop fighting. For this Government to ignore their plight and leave this injustice burning would be reprehensible. They have a duty to start setting right the wrongs that these men have suffered.

If we needed more evidence that this Government have no regard for our ex-miners, a few weeks ago, in response to my question, the Prime Minister said that...
she was proud to be raising safety standards in mines—forgetting that her predecessors closed them all. Raising safety standards in closed mines is perhaps the only achievement that the former Prime Minister can safely claim.

This debate goes further than just miners or the miners’ pensions that must be re-evaluated. This debate reaches to the way we as a society care for those we sent into dangerous conditions, those who lost their jobs when the pits were closed and those who have seen their communities neglected, so we must today send the message that the indignity will end. Our ex-miners are still the beating hearts of towns such as Leigh, and now we must all give them the respect they deserve for their service to their local communities.

9.9 pm

Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): It is a great privilege to speak in this debate. I want to congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Easington (Grahame Morris), who is almost my constituency neighbour, on introducing this debate. In Bishop Auckland, I obviously represent hundreds if not thousands of former Durham miners who are affected by this injustice. As other hon. Members have said, mineworkers did difficult and dangerous work. They built the wealth of this country for over 150 years, and we owe them a huge debt.

One of the things in the Chief Secretary’s letter that really jumped out at me was her claim that the scheme works for beneficiaries. It patently does not work for beneficiaries. She says that the guarantee of value for individuals is that there should be no reduction in cash terms in the overall value of the mineworkers’ pension. What that means is that people can and, in fact, do see reductions in the real values of these pensions. This is deeply unfair. The Treasury has had £4,438 million from the surpluses of the scheme.

Andrew Bridgen: Does the hon. Lady agree with me that in this debate, for once, the right hon. and hon. Members taking part in it are not asking the Government to put their hand into their pockets, but asking the Government to get their hand out of the pockets of the former miners and their widows?

Helen Goodman: Well, I think we will hear whether Treasury Ministers see it in quite that way at the end of the debate.

The other unfairness is that, as hon. Members have said, the 50-50 split is completely arbitrary. No reason has yet been given as to why the split should not be 70-30 or even 90-10. Another point worth bearing in mind is not just that the mineworkers contributed to the scheme, but that for many years miners were not well-paid industrial workers. I hope my hon. Friend the Member for Bolsover (Mr Skinner) is not going to correct me, but my recollection is that, in 1972, the average wage of a miner was £26 a week. By no stretch of the imagination were people having a high standard of living, and the very least they can expect is that they and their families have a decent and dignified retirement.

Not only is this unfair, but it is also urgent. My hon. Friend the Member for Blaenau Gwent (Nick Smith) spoke beautifully about the impact on his family of the accidents and ill health that came with being a miner. In my constituency, the wards where the former miners live have a healthy life expectancy fully 10 years less than in other parts of the constituency. These are not one-off anecdotes; this is a whole systematic impact on communities.

My final point is that this is completely affordable. I think we have heard that the value of the pension to individual miners is now about £4,000 a year. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Doncaster North (Edward Miliband) said, the Treasury has grabbed the £4 billion, and having done this deal it is trying to hold on to it. I would like to set this in context. This is a Government whose Members are seriously considering electing as the next Prime Minister of this country somebody promising tax cuts worth £4,500 to everybody with an income over £50,000 a year. Surely if there is any commitment to justice in this country, before there are any more tax cuts for any wealthy people, the mineworkers should get their money.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. I am sorry, but we have to reduce the time limit to five minutes.

9.14 pm

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (PC): I thank the hon. Member for Easington (Grahame Morris) for securing this important debate. I agreed with every single word of his speech. He made an unimpeachable case and the motion should be supported this evening by the Government.

It has been four months since our last debate on this issue. Despite calls from several hon. Members and a petition signed by more than 100,000 people, which I was proud to present to the Prime Minister at No. 10 Downing Street in March with the hon. Gentleman, there has been little progress. I presented the petition alongside campaigner Ken Sullivan, Gareth Hughes, Emlyn Davies and Neville Warren, who have worked tirelessly for justice. I pay tribute to them for their work.

Coalmining shaped the Wales that we know today. Our landscape was reshaped by massive slag heaps and our population shifted en masse from rural Wales to the coalfields, creating vibrant communities, only for them to be ripped apart by the brutality of Thatcherism. The miners strike of 1984 remains vivid in my memory. I was only eight at the time and clearly oblivious to the forces at work. However, the events of that year and their aftermath left a lasting impression on my political thinking. I do not come from a mining family. However, many of my school mates did and I remember to this day the impact of that strike on their wellbeing as that year-long struggle developed.

My father, however, was a trade union shop steward with the electricians union and it was clear to me what side of the fight we were on as a family. This year my father told me, out of the blue, that his grandfather was killed in a mining disaster underground at a pit near Llanelli, which just goes to show that for Wales the coal industry is deeply personal for the entire nation, which is why today’s debate has added significance. I became acutely aware of the power of the British state to destroy Welsh communities and became convinced that the best
way to protect my country was the creation of a Welsh state, as opposed to leaving economic powers in the hands of Westminster.

In many respects I come from a frontier community, which borders post-industrial and rural Wales. The Amman valley sits on the anthracite coalfield, which produces the best coal in the world. To our west lies rural Wales, to the north the beautiful wilderness of the Brecon Beacons, to the south the coast and the great industrial urban centres of Swansea and Llanelli, and to the east the Welsh coalfields, which stretch the whole way, more or less, to the English border. The people of the Welsh coalfields are extremely proud people. Community bonds continue to be strong. Our communities continue to be vibrant. What we lack in comparative economic wealth we make up for in social vitality. That is the legacy of the mining industry and mineworkers.

One obvious example for me is the continued importance that the communities I serve place on sports clubs. I am deeply humbled to serve as the honorary vice-president of Ammanford rugby club and Penygroes rugby club. It is a tradition for me to wear the ties of local sporting clubs in this House. Today I am wearing the tie of Ystradgynlais rugby club. Although that is outside my constituency, in Powys, the eagle-eyed will have noticed that the Ystradgynlais crest features a miner’s lamp.

Our debt today for the incredible communities that we are lucky to live in in my part of the world lies with the mineworkers of the past. The conditions that they worked in were terrible, causing long-term health damage for thousands. The least that they deserve for their contribution is dignity, but successive Westminster Governments, both blue and red, have let them down. Twenty-five years of injustice have been inflicted on them, while the miners—the people who produced the wealth in the first place—are receiving as little as £10 a week from the scheme. As we have heard in today’s debate, the average pay-out is only £84. As we know too, at least £4.4 billion has been siphoned off by the Treasury.

Darren Chapman (Dunfermline and West Fife) (SNP): The time that the Fife miners spent working in the pits has obviously had a greatly detrimental effect on their health. Is it not time that we had an immediate review? Time is of the essence and this is a wrong that we need to put right now.

Jonathan Edwards: My hon. Friend makes a vital point. I suppose my question for the British Government this evening is this. If they are so confident of their case, what do they have to lose by agreeing to an independent review?

The 50-50 surplus arrangement has served the British Government extremely well. As we have heard, it was negotiated during the privatisation of the industry in 1994 by the then Conservative UK Government. There was a review by the Labour Government in 2003, but they decided against any adjustments. The Treasury argued that the guarantee arrangement enables the trustees of the scheme to authorise riskier investment strategies, enabling greater returns for the mineworkers’ pension scheme which are then passed on to pensioners, as well as, of course, to the Treasury. Nobody is disputing the importance of the guarantee or the logic of that argument.

The question at hand is whether the British Government should be receiving such enormous sums for their role as the guarantor. Considering the secure nature of the MPS, it seems clear to me that the British Government cannot justify their current claim on the generated surpluses.

I have to tell those on the Treasury Bench that the general feeling out there in mining communities is that this is the latest in a long line of injustices perpetrated by the British Government on the miners, their families and the coalfield communities. About 22,000 people in Wales are affected by this scandal. I was so proud to present the petition calling for an urgent review to Downing Street in March. If the Minister values the hard work of the miners who endured in terrible conditions and their invaluable role in shaping the coalfield communities we live in today, and considering the length of time since the last review, the British Government should accept the motion.

9.20 pm

Wayne David (Caerphilly) (Lab): I come from a mining family. Both of my grandfathers were coal miners. One worked in the Garw and Llynfi valleys and the so-called south crop, and the other worked in coalmines close by. Today, I represent a former mining constituency. My constituency contains the village of Senghenydd, which in 1913 saw the worst mining disaster in the whole of the British coalfield: 439 men and boys lost their lives in an absolutely horrific explosion. More recently, the collieries of Bedwas and Penallta closed immediately after the miners’ strike of 1984-85. They were two of the largest collieries in the whole of south Wales and the effect on the local area was devastating. What is more, no real attempt was made to provide alternative employment.

The legacy of coalmining in my area left two deep scars. The first is the issue of miners’ compensation for dust. That issue loomed large during my first years in the House. After a long campaign and a hard fight, many former miners did receive the compensation they needed. Not all of them. There were surface workers who did not get any compensation, even though they suffered from dust. Nevertheless, it was a hard fight.

The second big issue is the mineworkers’ pension scheme. As we have heard this evening, this has not been resolved. The essence of the problem is that the Government and the scheme’s trustees came to an agreement to share the surplus of the scheme 50-50. Essentially, that was an arbitrary division. By 2000, it was clear that the scheme was not working as many people intended it to work. The Coalfield Communities Campaign argued at that time that it was too generous a split for the Government. It queried the actuarial advice, saying it was too cautious. Perhaps we have to cast doubt on the advice itself and whether proper advice of any kind was provided. It would be good, as has been called for, if we saw from the Government the advice received at the time.

A review did take place, but because of market instability it came to the conclusion that there should be no change. The result has been that the surplus has become a real surplus. It has escalated hugely, so that from 1994 to November 2018 we have seen a surplus going to the Government of £4.5 billion. That is a heck of a lot of money by any standards—a real windfall.
The Government have used the justification that much of the money is used to help former coalfield communities. I would make the point that that should not be the case, because money should be provided from other resources. I also have to question whether that money has in fact been used to help those former communities. What is absolutely certain in my view is that that money should also be going to help former miners and their widows. That is where, morally, it ought to go, in total. That is why we need a commitment to a fundamental review, the objective of which should be that the full benefit of the pension scheme should go to the miners and their widows. In short, we are asking this evening that the miners should, at long last, have justice.

9.25 pm

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Caerphilly (Wayne David) and there have been some excellent contributions tonight. I thank the Backbench Business Committee for bringing forward this important issue and I commend the hon. Member for Easington (Grahame Morris) for leading the debate. He gave an excellent speech, which illustrated the key issues at the outset, detailing his family mining history and giving the personal example that, sadly, his dad died before reaching pension age. He was correct to highlight the dramatic death rate: an average of 10,000 miners in receipt of their pension are dying a year. The death rate is rising, which means that the longer that this Government do not take any action, the more of a windfall that generates for the Treasury. That is why action is needed soon. He also highlighted the generally low pension rates that miners in the miners’ pension scheme receive. As we heard, these are not huge sums of money. That money is still difficult to live on, and the example of somebody getting just £8.50 a week was really illustrative. Overall, his contribution was measured and well delivered.

We had 12 other contributions from Back Benchers, with cross-party agreement, which is really good. I pay testament to the work by and contribution from the hon. Member for Barnsley East (Stephanging Peacock), who unearthed the lack of actuarial advice back in 1994 and the unfairness in the fact that £1 billion spent in coalfield communities is well dwarfed by the £4.5 billion that the Government have taken out of the fund. As others have said, the hon. Member for Blaenau Gwent (Nick Smith) made an emotional contribution about the effect on his family. I have signed early-day motion 235 in support of changes to the 50-50 split and of the cross-party letter organised by the hon. Member for Easington (Grahame Morris) for leading the debate. He gave an excellent speech, which illustrated the key issues at the outset, detailing his family mining history and giving the personal example that, sadly, his dad died before reaching pension age. He was correct to highlight the dramatic death rate: an average of 10,000 miners in receipt of their pension are dying a year. The death rate is rising, which means that the longer that this Government do not take any action, the more of a windfall that generates for the Treasury. That is why action is needed soon. He also highlighted the generally low pension rates that miners in the miners’ pension scheme receive. As we heard, these are not huge sums of money. That money is still difficult to live on, and the example of somebody getting just £8.50 a week was really illustrative. Overall, his contribution was measured and well delivered.

It has been a real disappointment that Governments of all colours have benefited from the 50:50 arrangement and that, to date, sadly, none have been willing to make any changes. In fact, if we look at the ministerial responses over the years, we see that they are actually all the same. It does not matter if it is a new Minister, a Tory Minister or a Labour Minister; they have all trotted out the same arguments, which appear to be the fact that the guarantee was welcomed at the time, that it reduces the risk on the miners’ pension scheme, that it provides for an RPI uplift on pensions and that it generates higher investment return. Those are moot points. Of course, the guarantee’s existence is a good thing. However, given that the UK Government received a surplus of nearly £4.5 billion by 2018, the argument that a 50:50 split is still a fair risk and reward for the Government providing that guarantee has less and less credibility. That is further highlighted by the fact that the long-term success of the fund has not changed, despite recessions and stock market crashes along the way. As others have said, 25 years on, the risk has diminished greatly. It really does take a special type of blinkers from this Government to ignore any moral arguments on change.

What Governments have also overlooked are the contributions holidays that were undertaken in the 1980s—money that otherwise could have been allocated for the benefit of mineworkers. Moreover, the reduced risk to the MFS resulting from the guarantee is welcome, but it is often overlooked that in 1994, during privatisation, adopting that model not only reduced the risk in the private sector but also allowed the Government to get a higher return from the privatisation. Those are further things that need to be considered in the bigger picture.

Labour and Tory Ministers have long argued that the guarantee has allowed higher-risk, higher-value investments to be made and thereby resulted in returns higher than they would otherwise have been. This is correct, but the Government bandying around figures about a 33% increase is not helpful because they are based on assumptions that suit them. In addition, it is not just the fund that has grown; the UK Government’s investment reserve also benefits from the success of the performance of the MFS. That has increased in value from £1.1 billion in 2014 to £1.5 billion in 2017, which has allowed the release of £475 million to the Government in the last financial year. These are huge sums of money the Government are benefitting from. Clearly, even if we change the 50-50 split, they will still make large sums of money.

Another Government line that has been attempted over the years is that MPS trustees are happy with the current arrangements, but that is patently untrue, as the hon. Member for Easington highlighted. The trustees have written to Governments in the past, but they say that they still will not engage and make the changes, so that is another dead duck from the Government.

We need clarity about what the UK Government hope to achieve. The Minister for Energy and Clean Growth has asked her officials to explore the trustees’ options for revising the scheme, so what are the Government’s aims and ideas? What progress has been made in the year since she asked that this happen? Critically, what does she mean by her comment that the revisions have to be to the “benefit of all parties”? It is clearly impossible to do the right thing by changing the share percentages without there being a financial detriment
to the Treasury. That sting in the tail looks like an in-built wrecking mechanism. We need to know what she means.

I pay tribute to the Coalfield Communities Campaign for lobbying the Government and for calling this the miners’ money. In 1999, it highlighted that the average pension was then just £38 per week; today, it is about £65 per week, although some figures say it is £85. This is critical considering the benefits that would accrue if we altered the split percentages. It also shows that, although the pensions have grown with the higher investment return, the miners are not exactly living in the lap of luxury, so that is another false start in talking about percentage increases.

In 2002-03, the campaign by the Coalfield Communities Campaign led to a proposal that the split change to an 85:15 split, but the then Minister, Brian Wilson, dismissed this as “off the radar screen in current circumstances”—[Official Report, 10 June 2003; Vol. 406, c. 186WH.]

When will someone in government be brave enough to suggest what could be considered and what they would consider fair?

As I have said, the Government have benefited to the tune of £4.5 billion to date. They have not been slow to reduce tax thresholds for those earning the most money or to introduce corporation tax reductions for the largest multinational companies. These measures, along with those on inheritance tax and other things, are projected to cost the Treasury £80 billion, according to figures from the Library based on previous Red Book projections by the UK Government. Surely, then, now is the time to consider fair?

Dr Alan Whitehead (Southampton, Test) (Lab): We have had a tremendous debate, which has combined passion, eloquence and reasonableness. Most importantly, not a single Member has put forward an iota of defence for the situation in which we currently find ourselves; indeed, support for the idea that there must be justice has come from some of the most unlikely sources in the House. However, the subject of the debate saddens me considerably.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Easington (Grahame Morris) on securing the debate. No doubt, he shares my sadness about the fact that—as we heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Bishop Auckland (Helen Goodman)—the Government have taken £4,438,000,000 out of the miners’ pension fund since 1994, while miners and their wives and families are watching the plunder go on before their eyes and passing away before anything can be done about it. We in this House surely cannot accept that we are going to stand by and allow another 50,000—another 80,000, another 100,000—miners and their families see that injustice continue. It is imperative that we do something urgently.

In response to a written parliamentary question, the Minister for Energy and Clean Growth stated in July 2018 that she had “asked BEIS officials to work with the Trustees to explore options for revising the scheme to”, as the hon. Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Alan Brown) pointed out,

"the benefit of all parties.”

I cannot conceive what further benefit it would be possibly justifiable to give to the Government after all this money has gone out over these years.
Andrew Bridgen: I have done a quick calculation: if it is correct that there are currently 158,000 beneficiaries and the surplus taken of the Government share of the fund is about £4.45 billion, that is over £28,000 for every surviving beneficiary that the Government have already taken from that fund.

Dr Whitehead: The hon. Gentleman makes a powerful point—possibly with the aid of his calculator—that I had not put forward this evening, and it shows the scale of this injustice. He is right to state that on the Floor of the House for us all to hear.

The Minister for Energy and Clean Growth stated that she had
“asked BEIS officials to work with the Trustees to explore options for revising the scheme to the benefit of all parties.”

I think not; it needs to be to the benefit of one particular party to the scheme. If she was correct in stating that she had asked BEIS officials to work with trustees to explore options for revising the scheme, where are the changes? What has happened? My understanding is that nothing has happened—there have been no talks and there has been no action—and that all this is actually a few warm, or lukewarm, words about possible changes to the scheme when nothing is under way.

My expectation this evening is that the Minister will stand up and tell us two things. First, I want him to say that talks are going on to revise the scheme but a promise this evening that fundamental action will be taken now to change the amount of split that there is in the scheme and an acknowledgement that the risk to the Government is effectively nil and that they have effectively ridden freely on the backs of the miners for many years. I want the Minister to say, “This has to stop now and we are committed to making sure there will be justice for the miners in the future.”

I am confident, on the basis of this evening’s contribution, that that is what the Minister will say now, even if he was not thinking of saying it before, but I do hope that he had that in his mind before the debate began, because given the eloquence, passion and support from all in the House this evening, that is the least he should do at the end of this debate.

9.45 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Andrew Stephenson): I would like to start by paying tribute to the Mineworkers’ Pension Scheme. My uncle Bert worked at the Dean and Chapter colliery and then at the Mainsforth colliery. My great aunt Daisy and great uncle Tom spent most of their working lives at the National Coal Board in Team Valley in Gateshead. I grew up with stories of hard work, tough times, soot black baths and three pints after a hard day’s work because you could not taste the first through all the coal dust.

The Whips are rarely mentioned in this place, but the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Whip, the Lord Commissioner of Her Majesty’s Treasury, my hon. Friend the Member for Castle Point (Rebecca Harris), is on the Front Bench this evening. Her grandfather worked in the mines and her great-grandfather was in charge of the pit ponies at Boldon colliery in County Durham, so we both have strong links with the mining industry. I know that the same goes for one of my predecessors in this role, the Minister for Energy and Clean Growth, my right hon. Friend the Member for Devizes (Claire Perry). Her connections to mining communities were so strong that she had to pass responsibility for their pensions over to me.

Stephanie Peacock: The Minister refers to his predecessor. In my Adjournment debate back in February, she agreed to a meeting with me, coalfield MPs and the trustees, but unfortunately, despite several emails, that meeting never happened. Will the Minister commit today to a meeting with us?

Andrew Stephenson: I am always happy to meet anybody, and I am more than happy to meet people who have asked for meetings today. I believe that my predecessor, my hon. Friend the Member for Watford (Richard Harrington), who took on responsibility from my right hon. Friend the Member for Devizes, did have a meeting, but I am always happy to have further meetings on this topic or any other.

I was just going to clarify that the connections of my right hon. Friend the Member for Devizes were so strong that she had to pass over her responsibility for this topic. Her mother-in-law is a beneficiary of the scheme that we are discussing today. Her mother-in-law’s late husband, Bill O’Neill, was a leader of the coke workers union and I understand that he died very young as a result of his years of service underground. At the age of 16, my right hon. Friend’s husband turned down a job in the Keresley pit, but that did not stop him helping to organise port blockades to prevent Polish imports while he was a student, and getting into trouble with his university to protect—in his view—British coal. It is because we appreciate the importance of fairness to mining communities that my right hon. Friend the Member for Devizes, when she was in post, dedicated a considerable amount of time to this issue and instructed officials to do the same. She spent time understanding the arguments and concerns of all sides, thinking and talking through alternative proposals and weighing up the merits of the cases presented.

It has been four months since the last Adjournment debate on this matter. Since then, my right hon. Friend the Minister for Energy and Clean Growth has met the scheme’s trustees, and my predecessor, the Business and industry Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Watford, has met campaigners and coalfield MPs. Officials have also met the scheme’s trustees. For my part, even
though I have been in post for only two months, I have taken an interest in this debate not just because of my family background, but because a number of the right hon. and hon. Members who have spoken today have collared me in the corridors since my appointment. I have reviewed the trustees’ proposals, which my officials have been considering for some time, and I wrote to Her Majesty’s Treasury last week giving them my full support. I will be meeting the chair of the trustees, Chris Cheetham, on 24 June. Central to the trustees’ proposals is protecting existing bonuses. Under that option, if there is a deficit in the future, members will still see their guaranteed pensions continue to rise in line with RPI, and their current bonuses will not be eroded. Without that additional guarantee, members may not be able to get any increase in payment, possibly for many years. The proposals put to my predecessor by the trustees offer benefits to all pensioners, who will see their pensions secured into the future, even if the scheme was to go into deficit, by protecting the bonuses that have accrued to date. The trustees, who include former miners, believe that that is an important way of protecting future revenues for scheme members in the event of a future scheme deficit, because bonuses accrued at past evaluations could be eroded.

The trustees’ proposals would mean a significant additional liability for the Government. In turn, that creates an additional risk of a sizeable call on the public purse. However, I support the trustees’ aim to protect the revenues of individual pensioners. My officials have provided an analysis of the proposals, which I have now shared with Treasury colleagues. As I have said, I am dedicated to the best for miners across the country, which is why I am immensely proud of the scheme and of the investments that we are making to transform mining communities across the country.

Ian Lavery: I agree that this has been a fantastic debate, with everyone who participated believing that justice should be done for the miners. Will the Minister say whether the trustees’ proposals include a review of the 50-50 split?

Andrew Stephenson: They do not. There are six proposals, which I have written to the Treasury about, and the trustees felt that protecting existing bonuses earned is more important than a review of the 50-50 split at this time.

Edward Miliband: The motion states:

“That this House calls on the Government to carry out a review of the existing arrangements for the sharing of the surplus generated by the Mineworkers’ Pension Scheme.”

As I understand it, the Government will not vote against the motion, so will the Minister tell us what he is going to do after the motion passes, because it calls for precisely such a review?

Andrew Stephenson: As I just said, I will be meeting the trustees, and their proposals relate to six points, about which I have written to the Treasury to share my analysis.

Edward Miliband: But this House is about to pass a motion agreeing to a review, so the Government are going to have to do something about that. That is the point, and I think we would all be interested to know what the Minister intends to do.

Andrew Stephenson: I am setting out my Department’s position. Whether a review is undertaken is a matter for the Treasury, and the Treasury’s position was set out in a letter from the Chief Secretary to the Treasury to MPs on 14 May. That position has not changed. I am sure that the Chief Secretary to the Treasury and other colleagues in that Department will want to reflect on any motion passed by this House, but I am trying to update the House in response to the Opposition Front-Bench spokesman, who asked what the Government were doing about the proposals that had previously been under discussion—the proposals that have been brought forward by the scheme’s trustees.

The proposals have been considered for several months. They are balanced, and I support them. With the support of my Department, I have formally written to the Treasury to say that we support the proposals, because the trustees have identified that protecting already accrued bonuses is more important than the 50-50 split.

Alan Brown: The Minister seems to be saying that the proposals being considered are from the trustees and they have not proposed any changes to the 50-50 split. Is it not the case that the trustees have said today that the Government are not willing to discuss a change to the 50-50 split? Is he saying that he thinks it is fair to maintain that 50-50 ratio?

Andrew Stephenson: The trustees have made it clear that protecting bonuses already accrued is their priority, rather than renegotiating a greater share of future surpluses. I have not met the trustees, and I have already given the House the date when I will be meeting them. I have seen the six proposals from the trustees, which have been considered by my predecessor and his predecessor, and I acted swiftly in my first two months in office to ensure that my Department supports those proposals and will write to the Treasury encouraging their adoption.

Stephanie Peacock: The trustees’ proposals are important. However, speaking to that is a red herring and does not answer what this debate is about. Every single person who has spoken in this debate has talked about the 50-50 split. Will the Minister please get up and answer that point?

Andrew Stephenson: I certainly will. I think I have only two minutes left, and I was going to come on to exactly that point. I was addressing the question of what has been done to date.

I began by saying that we owe the miners loyalty and respect, which includes being honest. In this case, the honest answer is that the current position, whereby the Government guarantee arrangements and split the surpluses, is a fair settlement. It is reflected in the fact that successive Governments of all political persuasions have retained the split currently in place.

Helen Goodman: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Surely the Government cannot ignore a motion passed by the whole House following a Backbench Business Committee debate.

Mr Speaker: The short answer is that that is not a point of order, but it is open to the Government to do that. Whether it is politically wise is another matter.
In the event that Members are disappointed, I feel sure they will trouble the Backbench Business Committee for further debates, which may continue ad infinitum. I am sure the Minister would not want to countenance such an unfortunate, even grisly, scenario.

Andrew Stephenson: Thank you, Mr Speaker. The guarantee gives recipients security because, of course, they know future outcomes can never be known. As referenced earlier, my right hon. Friend the Chief Secretary to the Treasury has responded to the letter from the hon. Member for Blaenau Gwent (Nick Smith), sent on behalf of a cross-party group, by saying that she will not be reviewing the current arrangements.

I believe that all of us here today are united by our commitment to fairness for our miners and mining communities. Although we may be divided on the best way to deliver that, I can assure the House that I will seek to agree changes to the scheme that benefit scheme members and protect taxpayers.

9.58 pm

Grahame Morris: We were doing so well in this debate, and I am heartened by the many contributions, especially from Conservative Members. I say that not to be mean-spirited but to acknowledge the contributions and the sympathy shown for the arguments that have been made, which I appreciate. I had hoped the Minister would be rather more positive in his approach to those contributions.

We have had brilliant contributions from the hon. Members for Mansfield (Ben Bradley), for Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock (Bill Grant), for Carmarthen East and Dinefwr (Jonathan Edwards) and for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Alan Brown), from my right hon. Friend the Member for Doncaster North (Edward Miliband) and from my hon. Friend the Member for Ashfield (Gloria De Piero), for Barnsley East (Stephanie Peacock), for Blaenau Gwent (Nick Smith), for Midlothian (Danielle Rowley), for Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney (Gerald Jones), for Leigh (Jo Platt) and for Bishop Auckland (Helen Goodman).

We have also had notable interventions—too many to list—including from the youngest working miner to come into Parliament, my hon. Friend the Member for Wansbeck (Ian Lavery), and from my inimitable hon. Friend the Member for Bolsover (Mr Skinner). We have had some terrific interventions, including from the hon. Members for North West Leicestershire (Andrew Bridgen) and for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens) and from my hon. Friend the Member for Hartlepool (Mike Hill) and a number of others.

Justice knows no age and, irrespective of the ages of the Members of Parliament debating this issue, I think we can recognise the injustice that the miners, their widows and beneficiaries are suffering. The Treasury forecast was that it would receive, at best, £2 billion, but it has received more than £4.4 billion and there is an ongoing commitment.

The motion, which I hope the House will agree, instructs the Government to conduct a review of the existing surplus sharing arrangements. My understanding is that the trustees want to do that, too.

Question put and agreed to.
Resolved,
That this House calls on the Government to carry out a review of the existing arrangements for the sharing of the surplus generated by the Mineworkers' Pension Scheme.

Edward Miliband: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Thanks to my hon. Friend the Member for Easington (Grahame Morris) having secured this debate, the House has now passed a motion stating:

“That this House calls on the Government to carry out a review of the existing arrangements for the sharing of the surplus generated by the Mineworkers’ Pension Scheme.”

I wonder whether you could give us some guidance, Mr Speaker. With the House having passed, without opposition and for the first time in 25 years of this scheme’s operation, this very important motion, can we use your good offices to persuade the Government to carry out the will of the House? It was very open to the Government to divide the House on this motion, but they choose not to do so, which must mean that they agree with it. Presumably, that means they are going to do something about it, if this House’s deliberations and possible votes are to be meaningful.

Mr Speaker: The right hon. Gentleman is a natural optimist, and I say that in no pejorative spirit. I am sad to have to advise him and the House of the correct procedural position. I am not making any evaluative judgment; I am simply making a statement of what is. The situation is that the only votes that bind in this place are votes on legislation and votes on taxation. This vote does not bind. It is an expression of the will of the House. I am sorry to say that there have been many occasions on which Backbench Business Committee debate motions have been passed but have not been implemented subsequently by the Government. I rather fancy that this matter will be returned to again and again and again if Members feel that the settled will of the House has not been honoured in practice. I will also add that a situation in which the settled will of the House is not then honoured in practice is bad for Parliament—period.

Business without Debate

TREASURY COMMITTEE

Ordered,
That Stewart Hosie be discharged from the Treasury Committee and Alison Thewliss be added.—(Bill Wiggin, on behalf of the Selection Committee.)
UK Foreign Policy: China and Hong Kong

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

10.2 pm

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD):
I am delighted to have the opportunity to bring this matter to the House for what has turned out to be a more topical debate than we had realised at the point when I was successful in obtaining it. I do not want to detain the House unnecessarily, but it is worth reminding ourselves about the particular, special legal and moral obligations that we in the United Kingdom have towards Hong Kong and its people. I will precis those briefly, and I do that not to insult the intelligence of the House, which will be well acquainted with them, as will those who are following our proceedings, but because it is sadly a more topical debate than we had realised at the point I may: The number of times I made myself clear to the immigration officers at Heathrow airport that I am British, the attitude I have to Britain because I took part in the Umbrella Revolution in 2014. I confess that that was very much what I had anticipated this debate would be about.

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (The Cotswolds) (Con):
Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that China is a member of the UN P5 and of the World Trade Organisation and therefore does believe in an international rules-based system? Hong Kong has one of the strongest independent legal systems in the world and the extradition Bill is described as one of the worst threats to that legal system of any Bill introduced so far. As such, the Chinese Government would do well to heed the large number of protestors on the streets in the past few hours.

Mr Carmichael: I differ from the hon. Gentleman only in the smallest grammatical sense, in that as a member of all those various international bodies, the Chinese Government ought to believe in, adhere to and demonstrate respect for international law. In this particular care, they are manifestly failing to do that.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): The one country, two systems agreement between China and Britain is under threat. Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that the real need to balance our global human rights obligations with the need to secure a trade deal does not mean that we forget those obligations? Furthermore, does he agree with the need to secure a trade deal does not mean that we forget those obligations? Furthermore, does he agree that we can attempt to use our influence and trade to seek the better understanding of acceptable human rights standards throughout the world, and that the two can and must go hand in hand?

Mr Carmichael: I absolutely agree with that. I am a strong advocate of human rights and often preach the gospel of their universality, but I am not starry-eyed about it, especially when it comes to working with countries that do not reach or have not yet reached the standards that we adhere to in this country. I will always engage with countries where I think there is an opportunity for improvement, but we have to see that improvement. As far as the People's Republic of China is concerned, we are not seeing an improvement. In fact, if anything, we are going backwards: I think of the treatment of the Uyghur Muslims in the Xinjiang province; I think of the treatment of the people of Tibet; and I think of the treatment of religious minorities right across the People's Republic of China and of the people of Hong Kong.

As I have said, I had anticipated that our debate tonight would rehearse a number of the areas that we have spoken about in the past. I was thinking about the treatment of the Umbrella Movement protestors; the closure of political parties; the expulsion of the Financial Times journalist, Victor Mallet; the creation of the new offence of insulting China's national anthem without any effort
[Mr Carmichael]

to define what that insult might be and how it would be constituted; and the abduction of booksellers. In fact, when we consider all these things, it is impossible now, especially given the demonstration of support that we saw in Hong Kong at the weekend, to consider any of these things without considering the position in relation to the extradition arrangements and the Bill, which is currently coming towards the Legislative Council. These issues all tie in to this question of extradition.

You spoke earlier, Mr Speaker, about our mutual friend Benedict Rogers. In fact, in preparing for my debate tonight, I had recourse to an opinion piece that he had recently published. I want to read just a bit of it for the benefit of the House, because it illustrates perfectly how the position of the booksellers in particular and the other causes that I have mentioned all tie into this question of the extradition legislation. He wrote:

‘“If the extradition law is passed, it is a death sentence for Hong Kong,” said Lam Wing-kee in a crowded coffee shop in Taipei. ‘Beijing will use this law to control Hong Kong completely. Freedom of speech will be lost. In the past, the regime kidnapped its critics like me illegally. With this law, they will abduct their critics legally.’

Yet Lam Wing-kee, 63, knows from first-hand experience what the consequences of this change to the extradition law could be, and how the Chinese Communist party behaves. On 24 October 2015, Lam, who managed a bookshop and publishing business in Causway Bay that sold books critical of China’s leadership, was arrested as he crossed the border into mainland China in Shenzhen. There then followed an eight-month nightmare in which he was first imprisoned in Ningbo and then moved to Shaoguan, a small mountain town in Guangdong province where he was assigned to work in a library—better off than in prison, but still not free and completely cut off from the outside world.

‘I was not physically tortured, but mentally I was threatened and subjected to brainwashing,’ he said.

When he was first arrested, Lam was forced to sign two statements: surrendering his right to inform his family of his whereabouts and his right to a lawyer. Over the eight months he was held in China, he was forced to write confessions more than 20 times. Several times he was filmed, with an interrogator behind him whom he could not see, and these were then broadcast on national television—one of many forced televised confessions that have become a feature of Xi Jinping’s regime.

‘I didn’t write what they wanted me to write, they would write it for me,’ Lam said. ‘If my confession was not satisfactory, they would tell me what to write.’

That is the reality of the criminal justice system to which we now countenance, or see Hong Kong countenancing, returning people from Hong Kong. That is exactly why it was decided, back at the time of the decision—once—it was one of the many aspects that have become a feature of Xi Jinping’s regime.

Mr Carmichael: That is absolutely the case. I hope that our Government would take assurances that that would not happen if they were to extradite anyone to Hong Kong. But, frankly, if the Government of Hong Kong are able to disregard the joint declaration in the way that they do, I am afraid that I do not set any great store by their willingness to abide by the assurances of the sort that we might expect in the normal course of things. It comes back to the point about adherence to and respect for the international rule of law and a rules-based order system.

There is a great deal more that I could say, but I know that the hon. Member for Gloucester (Richard Graham) wants to speak for a couple of minutes and I am keen to ensure that the Minister has every opportunity to give the fullest explanation of the Government’s position, especially given the number of hon. Members who have stayed behind for this debate.

10.17 pm

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): I am grateful to the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) for calling this debate and for allowing me to speak very briefly in it.

Among other things, the agreed one country, two systems approach recognised the difference between the practice of common law in Hong Kong, and the rule of law under the control and guidance of the Communist party of China on the mainland. That is why there is currently no extradition treaty between Hong Kong or any common law jurisdiction and China. If the argument, therefore, is that things have changed, it is surely for the Hong Kong Government and Chief Executive—who has responsibility, as she reminded us this week, is to the people of Hong Kong—to make that case. The Foreign Office has, therefore, rightly expressed concern about the proposed changes. It said that they must be subject to the “highest levels of scrutiny” and called for time for “proper consideration of all alternative options and safeguards.”
In practice, as the right hon. Gentleman has explained, the legislation could be pushed through in a fortnight, while several hundred thousand protesters may demonstrate again that their views are not being fully considered.

The irony is that this issue arose over the absence of an extradition treaty with Taiwan, and Taiwan Ministers have said that this proposal will not solve the required extradition of the man from Hong Kong who is currently in Taiwan. Therefore, what was urgent is not going to be resolved, what was not urgent is being rushed through, and what is at risk is the confidence of business and the freedoms of speech that have made Hong Kong so successful and its financial markets so important. When the UK, the EU, Canada and the US—all great supporters of Hong Kong—are concerned, Hong Kong should worry that its exemption from the US-China trade wars may not continue unchallenged. I therefore urge the Minister to talk directly with Hong Kong’s Chief Executive, Carrie Lam, who is well known to us all, and to urge her to reconsider the Government’s approach to this business.

Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con): My hon. Friend refers to business in Hong Kong. Does he agree that, if the new extradition treaty goes through, Hong Kong’s reputation as a safe place to do business could be seriously undermined to the point that major international businesses may consider relocating their bases in other jurisdictions? Is that not a concern that we should be addressing?

Richard Graham: It is certainly true that the British chamber of commerce in Hong Kong has privately expressed considerable concern over the proposals, and the American chamber has been more outspoken still—so, yes, there are concerns.

10.19 pm

The Minister for Asia and the Pacific (Mark Field): I thank the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) for initiating this debate and for continually highlighting developments in Hong Kong. I also express my gratitude for the contributions and sincere interest—perhaps silent interest in some cases—expressed by a number of hon. Members here, particularly my hon. Friend the Member for Gloucester (Richard Graham). Clarifying with the Hong Kong Government what these proposals will mean is clearly something that I intend to do in very quick order.

This was billed as a slightly more general debate, and given that we had an urgent question earlier, I do not wish to spend this time entirely by simply covering the same old ground, important though that ground is, but let me start with a few words about the UK’s relationship with China. We believe that we have a constructive relationship based on a strong economic partnership but also our position as leading nations of the world. The UK and China are both, of course, P5 nations of the United Nations. Trade and investment links are at record levels, and people-to-people links, particularly among Chinese students—the largest single cohort in the UK—are thriving.

The UK’s approach to China is pragmatic. It maximises the benefits of co-operation while doing its best to protect our national security. As G20 members with seats on the UN Security Council, the UK and China can do more than most to address a range of global challenges. From medical research to sustainable development, we have co-operated, and will continue to do so, for our mutual benefit in ways that support global prosperity, security and stability.

Of course, this partnership has its challenges. China’s growing influence is putting pressure on the global rules-based system, and we regularly express our very real concerns about issues, including its stance on human rights, its respect for international conventions and its failure fully to protect intellectual property. But we work with China where doing so is in line with our values and protects our national interests, including the security of our people and businesses. We are clear and direct where we believe that China’s actions are incompatible with those values.

The UK Government are acutely and continually aware of our historical responsibility towards Hong Kong, specifically as one of the joint signatories of the 1984 joint declaration that established the principle of one country, two systems. That joint declaration is a legally binding treaty registered, as I said, with the UN. Its objectives clearly apply to both signatories—the Government of the People’s Republic of China and the UK. It remains in force and remains relevant to the conduct of life in Hong Kong. We are absolutely committed to ensuring that it remains faithfully implemented for the period up to 2047, as the hon. Member for Rotherham (Sarah Champion) rightly mentioned.

The one country, two systems principle provides Hong Kong with the foundations for success as a truly global financial centre and prosperous world city, as touched on by my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce). It safeguards Hong Kong’s capitalist economic system, its high degree of autonomy, its system of common law, its independent judiciary, and the rights and freedoms of its people and those who are lawfully residing there. However, as the Government’s most recent six-monthly reports have made clear, we believe that important areas of the one country, two systems framework are coming under increasing pressure. I take this opportunity to reassure the House that we engage in an ongoing and frank dialogue—a sometimes private, but frank dialogue—with the Chinese and Hong Kong authorities about the implementation of the joint declaration.

Turning to our relationship with the Hong Kong Government, I want to stress that we have warm, constructive and positive links across a wide range of other issues. As an example, just last month, I joined the start of the inaugural UK-Hong Kong Government-to-Government financial dialogue, led on our side by the Economic Secretary to the Treasury. This involved the two Governments discussing co-operation between our globally leading financial services centres, building on rich industry-to-industry links. I welcome the decision for the UK to be the partner country for Hong Kong’s Business of Design Week this year. It is the largest design festival in Asia and it is our pleasure to support Hong Kong in this area. It is also a great opportunity to showcase the global reputation of the UK’s creative sector.

It is also right that we take the opportunity to turn our minds collectively to the ramifications of the Hong Kong Government’s contentious proposals to change their extradition laws, following a highly publicised homicide in Taiwan, allegedly carried out by a Hong Kong national. Civil society groups, including organisations...
that represent legal professionals and businessfolk in Hong Kong, have aired deep concerns about both the content of the proposals and the short consultation period. They fear above all that Hong Kong nationals and residents risk being pulled into China’s legal system, which can, as the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland pointed out, involve lengthy pre-trial detentions, televised confessions and an absence of many of the judicial safeguards that we see in Hong Kong.

Mr Carmichael: The element of the two systems arrangements that I think most people consider most important is the existence of an independent judiciary in Hong Kong. That is why, when people hear about so-called concessions being made on human rights protections, they insist that those protections are written into law, because they are then judicially enforceable. Is the Minister prepared to take that message back to the Executive?

Mark Field: Absolutely, and I entirely endorse what the right hon. Gentleman says.

We note that the Hong Kong Government have tried to provide reassurance that no one will be transferred to China for political, religious or ethnic reasons and welcome their recent efforts to react to the unprecedented level of public concern—we understand that roughly 2,000 people have made statements on this issue locally over recent months, including in the Legislative Council, and I am as concerned as the right hon. Gentleman about the notion that they could be rushed through within the next fortnight or so.

I believe that Hong Kong’s lawmakers and members of civil society have put forward a number of alternative solutions, including the additional human rights safeguards, which must now be included in the proposed legislation. We believe that proper consideration must be given to all those alternative solutions as part of a comprehensive, ongoing consultation.

Despite those concerns, we do not assess that the proposals in themselves breach the joint declaration, although we will clearly keep that in mind, as the treaty did not explicitly deal with extradition arrangements. Nevertheless, the proposals undoubtedly would reduce the separation between the justice systems in Hong Kong and on the mainland and, therefore, would provide a very worrying precedent.

As the House will be aware, the operation of the court system in mainland China is very different from the one that applies in Hong Kong. Voices from within Hong Kong and the wider international community have expressed concern that fear of extradition to China could cause a chilling effect on Hong Kong’s rights and freedoms and, more insidiously, might result in increased self-censorship. Most recently, the Hong Kong chamber of commerce has called for wide-ranging protections in the legislation.

As Members have rightly pointed out, the rule of law is the absolute cornerstone of one country, two systems, and confidence in it is essential for sustaining and maintaining Hong Kong’s reputation as a global financial and professional services hub. That has been made abundantly clear to me in my two visits to Hong Kong as a Minister. I am hoping obviously to visit the island at some point later this year for a third time. Ultimately, I believe it is imperative that any changes to the extradition arrangements from Hong Kong to mainland China respect Hong Kong’s high degree of autonomy and will not impact on the rights and freedoms set down in the joint declaration.

It is now, as many of us will know, almost 22 years on from the handover of Hong Kong to China and the UK Government’s commitment to the joint declaration remains as robust as ever. We do issue six-monthly reports and, in the two years I have been a Minister, we have expressed concern, at each and every six-monthly report, that there has been a diminution in the exercise of one country, two systems, at least as far as too many political rights are concerned. We are committed to playing a rightful part in helping Hong Kong to prosper and go forward. Where we identify risks to Hong Kong’s continued success and autonomy, we will have no qualms in raising them. We shall continue to stress to the Chinese and Hong Kong authorities that, for confidence in that system to be maintained, Hong Kong must continue to enjoy a full measure of the high degree of autonomy and the rule of law as set out in the joint declaration.

I am grateful to all Members of the House, and particularly to the right hon. Gentleman, for the opportunity to state the Government’s position on this very important issue.

Question put and agreed to.

10.32 pm

House adjourned.
Electric Vehicles

1. Antoinette Sandbach (Eddisbury) (Con): What recent steps his Department has taken to support the development of electric vehicles.

2. Alison Mc Govern (Wirral South) (Lab): The Secretary of State knows that many of my constituents work in the automotive industry and how serious the situation is with Brexit. Constituents are writing to me to ask why there are so few charging points in the Wirral. This is a huge issue. Will he do something that this Government really have control over and take action now on the business rates impact on the automotive industry, so we can at last have some positive news for the automotive industry in Britain?

3. Glyn Davies (Montgomeryshire) (Con): What recent steps his Department has taken to support the development of electric vehicles.

4. Antoinette Sandbach: Does the Secretary of State agree that for electric vehicles to thrive additional capacity will be required, and that energy efficiency measures to bring every home to an energy performance certificate C standard are vital in delivering that, as they will reduce energy consumption by 25% and free that capacity for electric vehicle use?

5. Greg Clark: I completely agree with my hon. Friend. She is right to point out the connections between our energy systems and the future of mobility in how we drive cars. That is why the industrial strategy sets up a very close relationship with the EU for frictionless trade and everything that goes with it.

6. Glyn Davies: The Welsh Government are also promoting the development of electric vehicles, including the associated network of electric charging points. What steps is the Secretary of State taking to ensure liaison across the border between England and Wales to deliver the best possible distribution of electric vehicle charging points?

7. Greg Clark: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point. It is clear that if drivers are to have the confidence that they will be able to charge their vehicles, every part of the United Kingdom needs to be a part of that. My hon. Friends and I have regular discussions with the Welsh Government, and the roll-out of the charging network is in all parts of the United Kingdom.

8. Glyn Davies: TheWelsh Government, and the roll-out of the charging network is in all parts of the United Kingdom.

9. My hon. Friends and I have regular discussions with the Welsh Government, and the roll-out of the charging network is in all parts of the United Kingdom.

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12. Glyn Davies: The Welsh Government, and the roll-out of the charging network is in all parts of the United Kingdom.


The Secretary of State was asked—

BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL STRATEGY

The Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Greg Clark): In May I announced an additional £28 million, from the £250 million Faraday challenge, for the UK Battery Industrialisation Centre, where industry will test next generation world-leading technologies.

Antoinette Sandbach: Does the Secretary of State agree that for electric vehicles to thrive additional capacity will be required, and that energy efficiency measures to bring every home to an energy performance certificate C standard are vital in delivering that, as they will reduce energy consumption by 25% and free that capacity for electric vehicle use?

Greg Clark: I completely agree with my hon. Friend. She is right to point out the connections between our energy systems and the future of mobility in how we drive cars. That is why the industrial strategy sets up a very close relationship with the EU for frictionless trade and everything that goes with it.

Glyn Davies: The Welsh Government are also promoting the development of electric vehicles, including the associated network of electric charging points. What steps is the Secretary of State taking to ensure liaison across the border between England and Wales to deliver the best possible distribution of electric vehicle charging points?

Greg Clark: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point. It is clear that if drivers are to have the confidence that they will be able to charge their vehicles, every part of the United Kingdom needs to be a part of that.
Greg Clark: The take-up of electric vehicles is growing very quickly in this country. The investment that we are making in the charging network, with 17,000 public charging points, is a very important contribution to that. In the weeks ahead, the hon. Gentleman will see further announcements on how we can accelerate the deployment of charging technology.

Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con): I wonder whether the Secretary of State has received his invitation to the reveal of Lotus’s new electric hypercar on 16 July. It is the world’s first electric hypercar—designed, engineered and built in Britain. In a week when the motor industry has had some difficult news, does he agree that this is a great shot in the arm for the UK motor industry?

Greg Clark: It is indeed a great shot in the arm and I hope that I will see my hon. Friend there to celebrate it. It is fair to reflect that this is a difficult, challenging time for the automotive industry around the world, but through the decisions that we took in the industrial strategy to emphasise battery electric vehicles and the new technology, and connected and autonomous vehicles, we have made the right judgment about how to attract the jobs and companies that will be expanding in the future.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): Given the ongoing problems in recent years regarding the UK automotive sector and the ongoing problems affecting Tesla, is there not an opportunity for the Secretary of State to engage with the players in the sector, and the national battery manufacturing centre, to see whether some acquisition could be arrived at to produce electric cars in this country?

Greg Clark: We have many discussions. Just a few days ago, I had a major potential investor in battery technology in my office to discuss a potential investment. Through the Automotive Council, we work very closely with the sector, and the national battery manufacturing centre is a collaboration between the players in the industry that gives them confidence to be able to invest for the future in the UK.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): It is UK Government policy to end the sale of new diesel and petrol cars by 2040, but do we really have to wait 21 years to achieve that objective?

Greg Clark: It is important that we have a realistic move to the new fleet that we need. The targets were adopted in consultation with the industry. A lot of the capital investment needs to take place over a substantial period of time, and I would not want a situation in which we lost jobs and opportunities by setting a target that was not deliverable and feasible for manufacturers.

Rebecca Long Bailey (Salford and Eccles) (Lab): Might I begin by expressing my support for the efforts of my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds West (Rachel Reeves) in bringing forward her Bill today to legislate for net zero emissions by 2050? To achieve that, supporting our automotive industry will be vital, but Ford had warned that leaving the EU would add hundreds of millions to its costs, and after the vote, it said that it was considering closing plants. This warning has come to pass. Ford is now saying that another 6,000 jobs could be at risk in the event of no deal, which is particularly concerning now that it looks likely that the next PM will actively pursue it. What direct support has the Secretary of State offered Ford to reverse its decision, and has he considered the impact of a no deal on manufacturing when deciding who to back as the next Prime Minister?

Greg Clark: We have led the world and the cross-party consensus across the House on our move to net zero. The hon. Lady will know that just this week, the International Energy Agency described the Government’s efforts as “an inspiration for many countries who seek to design effective decarbonisation frameworks.”

When it comes to Ford and the automotive sector, she is right that companies in the sector have been crystal clear that we need to leave the European Union with a deal that allows us to continue to trade without frictions so that we will have in the future. All my efforts are directed at securing that deal.

Rebecca Long Bailey: I actually asked about what support had been offered to Ford. Last night I spoke to a Bridgend councillor, who said “We don’t need taskforces, commissions or working groups, we desperately need investment in Bridgend now.”

Sadly, it is not looking like any of the candidates for PM will support our car industry going forward. One thinks he knows more about car manufacturing than the boss of Jaguar Land Rover. Another said that there will be a stronger manufacturing base if we leave. Another denies that Nissan’s decision to pull the X-Trail was about Brexit, despite the company highlighting uncertainty; and the one who is allegedly the most reasonable has said that he is prepared to leave without a deal if there is a straight choice. Is it not the truth that whoever takes over as PM will drive manufacturing into the ground with their reckless approach to Brexit and that the Secretary of State’s legacy will sadly be decimated industries across our country?

Greg Clark: If the hon. Lady talks to people in the sector, she will know that the work we do with all companies in the sector is well respected and well regarded, whether that is the Faraday challenge or the support for individual companies such as we have seen in recent years. That support is available to Ford just as it is to any company working in the sector. As part of the work we are doing with the Welsh Government, we will attract a new investor to make use of those facilities and keep jobs for the future.

In terms of the relationship with the European Union, most, if not all, automotive suppliers want to see us reach a deal. That is my view, and I hope it is the hon. Lady’s view. In fairness, they have also said that the deal negotiated by the Prime Minister should have been approved. It is therefore of regret to me that that advice was not followed.

Rebecca Long Bailey: I actually asked about what support had been offered to Ford. Last night I spoke to a Bridgend councillor, who said “We don’t need taskforces, commissions or working groups, we desperately need investment in Bridgend now.”

Intellectual Property

2. Mr John Whittingdale (Maldon) (Con): What steps is he taking to increase protections for intellectual property.
The Minister for Energy and Clean Growth (Chris Skidmore): As my right hon. Friend is aware, the UK is considered to have one of the best intellectual property systems in the world, and we work continually to help keep that position. The Intellectual Property Office has committed in its recently published strategy to working towards making infringement socially unacceptable. We have commissioned research into consumer attitudes to counterfeit goods in order to assist with that.

Mr Whittingdale: Is my hon. Friend aware that online piracy of video and music content is still doing considerable damage to our creative industries? In particular, beoutQ, based in Saudi Arabia, is stealing content from a wide range of UK rights holders. Will he see what further measures can be taken to tackle this problem? Will he consider including economic harms in the scope of the measures set out in the Government’s Online Harms White Paper?

Chris Skidmore: Online piracy of any content is a key concern for the Government. We are aware of the specific issues with beoutQ and raised the matter with the Saudi Arabian Government. We will continue to make representations about its alleged infringement of UK creative content and support efforts to tackle piracy, wherever it occurs. However, the White Paper is to have a targeted approach that focuses on harms to individuals; it is not about economic harm to businesses.

Jonathan Reynolds (Stalybridge and Hyde) (Lab/Co-op): It is not just in intellectual property where we need better legal protections. My constituent Mr. Michael McGrory of Stalybridge recently took his employer to an employment tribunal for unauthorised deduction of wages, for breach of contract and for disability discrimination. He won his case but, rather than pay up, the company went into liquidation. The same directors set up the same business in the same premises under a different company registration and name. As a result, Mr McGrory cannot get his award enforced. Does the Minister agree that that is wrong? If so, how might we change the company formation process to stop that happening?

Chris Skidmore: I have great sympathy with the hon. Gentleman’s constituent. Obviously, we provide funding for the police intellectual property crime unit, which has seen 94 investigations and arrested or voluntarily interviewed for the police intellectual property crime unit, which has Gentleman’s constituent. Obviously, we provide funding absolutely agree with my right hon. Friend the Member for Morley and Outwood have been directly supported, with £1 million in grant funding to help them create nearly 200 jobs. The AD:Venture initiative, which is available to start-ups in the first three years of trading in the Leeds city region, provides grants of up to £25,000. That is alongside a range of other support including academic support and coaching.

Andrea Jenkyns: My hon. Friend will know that in 2017 the UK was the second biggest market in the EU for ultra low emission vehicles. Alfa Power, a company in my constituency, is a fine example of British engagement in the sector. What steps is he taking to further the sector’s progress? Next time he is in Yorkshire, will he visit Alfa Power to see the great work it is doing in electric charging points throughout Yorkshire?

Andrew Stephenson: I should be delighted to visit. The Government are investing nearly £1.5 billion until March 2021 to help to grow the market for ultra-low-emission vehicles. Yesterday I was pleased to announce £33 million of funding for the winners of the Advanced Propulsion Centre’s 12th competition. These latest projects focus on electrification and the future of low-emission vehicles as we aim to advance the UK’s low-carbon capacity.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): I am sure that the members of the ministerial team know that Huddersfield and Morley and Outwood are part of the dynamic Leeds city region, but are they aware of the Power Up The North campaign, which was launched this week? It needs to receive a lot of interest. It is intended to help small businesses to grow even faster and go further in our northern constituencies. Will the Minister put his efforts behind it?

Andrew Stephenson: I am delighted about the Power Up The North campaign. I wholeheartedly support it, and I am very pleased that my Department has been bolstered by the addition of the Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government, my hon. Friend the Member for Rossendale and Darwen (Jake Berry), who will help to further our work on the northern powerhouse. The Government are investing £694 million in the Leeds city region through growth deals, creating up to 10,000 jobs, allowing more than 2,000 homes to be built, and creating up to £640 million in public and private investment.

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP) rose—

Emma Hardy (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab) rose—

Mr Speaker: With all due respect to the indefatigability of the hon. Member for Glasgow East (David Linden), it has to be said that Hull is considerably nearer to the geographical sweet spot for the purposes of this question than could ever be said of Glasgow East.

Emma Hardy: Thank you, Mr Speaker. May I draw the Minister’s attention to Hull, one of the great cities that are part of the northern powerhouse? He is aware of the appalling way in which some of the people working for Grotto Hire have been treated—those who
were not paid over Christmas. I have met the Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, the hon. Member for Rochester and Strood (Kelly Tolhurst), to discuss the issue. What has the Department done to try to recover that money since our last meeting?

Andrew Stephenson: I know that the hon. Lady has discussed the issue with my ministerial colleague. I am not dealing with it personally, but I should be more than happy to have a conversation with my hon. Friend about it and come back to the hon. Lady.

Bill Esterson (Sefton Central) (Lab): The British Retail Consortium has reported that the high-street footfall is at a six-year low. Town centre businesses across the country are closing. Labour has a five-point plan to reinvigorate our high streets, in stark contrast to the Government’s worn-out platitudes and failure to act. Precisely when is the Minister going to produce a plan—or will the Government just keep walking by on the other side of the high street?

Mr Speaker: With particular reference to Morley and Outwood.

Andrew Stephenson: John Timpson has produced a plan for the Government, and in successive Budgets we have announced record support for the high street. There is £1.6 billion to help with business rates, and an additional £675 million for the future high streets fund.

Mr Speaker: With particular reference to Morley and Outwood.

Andrew Stephenson: The hon. Member for Rochester and Strood (Kelly Tolhurst), to discuss the issue. What has the Department done to try to recover that money since our last meeting?

Andrew Stephenson: I know that the hon. Lady has discussed the issue with my ministerial colleague. I am not dealing with it personally, but I should be more than happy to have a conversation with my hon. Friend about it and come back to the hon. Lady.

Fuel Poverty: North-East

4. Mr Stephen Hepburn (Jarrow) (Lab): What recent steps he has taken to tackle fuel poverty in the north-east. [911246]

The Minister for Energy and Clean Growth (Chris Skidmore): As my right hon. Friend the Member for Devizes (Claire Perry) has taken temporary ministerial leave of absence on compassionate grounds, I shall be answering all the questions relating to energy and clean growth today.

The Government made a manifesto commitment to tackle fuel poverty by upgrading fuel-poor homes to energy efficiency band C by 2030. Nearly 800,000 fewer fuel-poor households are living in the least efficient homes than was the case in 2010. We have also refocused the Government’s energy company obligation, and thousands of homes in the north-east have been improved as a result.

Mr Hepburn: Because of cruel Tory benefit changes and rip-off prices, fuel poverty in Jarrow has increased by 35% under this Government. Is the Minister proud of the choice that the Tories have given people, between heating and eating?

Chris Skidmore: It should be borne in mind that the fuel poverty metric is relative, which means that the number of people in fuel poverty will always fluctuate between 10% and 12%. It is important to focus on the average fuel poverty gap, which fell to £326 in 2016 from £341 in 2015.

Sarah Newton (Truro and Falmouth) (Con) rose—

Mr Speaker: Cornwall is a very considerable distance from the north-east, but I think that the Minister just about broadened the question.

Sarah Newton: We have been making good progress in reducing fuel poverty in Cornwall, but we could really do with some help with supercharging that progress. When will the Government publish their plan to deliver the excellent home energy efficiency targets in the clean growth strategy? If we could do that, it would save people, on average, about £400 a year.

Chris Skidmore: I can confirm that that will be taking place very shortly.

Offshore Wind Supply: Rates of Pay

5. Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab): What steps he is taking to tackle rates of pay in the offshore wind supply chain that are below the national living wage. [911247]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Kelly Tolhurst): In the autumn the Government will introduce legislation to extend the right to receive the national minimum wage to seafarers operating in UK territorial seas. Any business, British or otherwise, benefiting from consumer subsidies and the growth of UK offshore wind has a clear moral responsibility to abide by the spirit of UK employment law, even where operations take them beyond the UK’s formal jurisdiction.

Alex Cunningham: I think that is the most helpful answer I have had in this place since I got elected nine years ago so I am grateful to the Minister for that, but why do we have to wait until the autumn when she could introduce secondary legislation and close this loophole now?

Kelly Tolhurst: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his supplementary question. This is a complicated process; I have been working with my counterparts in the Department for Transport and we are committed to delivering this legislation in the autumn. As I mentioned at previous questions sessions, we have also doubled our enforcement on the national minimum wage and are determined to make sure we are tackling all areas where people are not upholding the spirit of UK employment law.

Karl Turner (Kingston upon Hull East) (Lab): It is disgraceful that P&O Ferries is employing Lithuanian cooks sailing from Hull to Zeebrugge on the “Pride of York” at €2.04 an hour. Filipino able-bodied seafarers crewing the “Pride of Hull” are paid $4.45 an hour. Will the Minister meet me to see what we can do together to stop these predatory capitalist companies taking advantage of foreign crews? This amounts to slave labour.

Kelly Tolhurst: I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising this point, and he is absolutely right: this is unacceptable, and I am more than happy to meet him to discuss it. But I just want to reiterate that the law is clear that any individual undertaking work in the UK is entitled to receive the national minimum wage; this includes workers in different sectors, which is why we are taking this action, and we will be laying legislation in the autumn.
Shared Prosperity Fund

6. Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): What recent discussions he has had with Cabinet colleagues on the shared prosperity fund.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Jake Berry): The Prime Minister recently appointed me as a joint Minister in this Department and in my existing role in the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government. That shows the Government’s commitment to drive forward the northern powerhouse, which has always been a partnership between local government, national Government, the industrial strategy and business. In this role I will continue to hold regular meetings to discuss EU exit, and the UK shared prosperity fund will remain a priority in that.

Mr Speaker: This shows that the Minister is a very busy man with many commitments and a very full diary.

Patricia Gibson: The Prime Minister told me in December 2018 that a consultation on the UK shared prosperity fund would take place by the end of that year. The silence on progress with this fund to replace the EU structural fund, worth £2.4 billion a year, is deafening and the lack of detail and communication is shameful given that these funds are designed to help all communities prosper. Will the Secretary of State tell us once and for all, when this fund will be designed and implemented? Will it match current levels or is this important fund going to be yet another casualty of Brexit?

Jake Berry: The hon. Lady is absolutely right that this Government have set forward our ambition to deliver a UK shared prosperity fund that creates wealth, growth and jobs in all parts of our United Kingdom. We have been clear that we will respect the devolution settlement, and we have been absolutely clear that we will consult the Scottish Government and other devolved Governments before we start the consultation on that. But the hon. Lady does not have to wait until then, because there have been meetings between officials and over 500 stakeholders at 25 official events across the country, and I am sure the hon. Lady will look forward to taking part in future events.

Stephen Crabb (Preseli Pembrokeshire) (Con): The shared prosperity fund represents a really good opportunity to improve the way in which we support poorer communities with funding—far too much of the EU structural funding has been wasted in the past—but will the Minister take this opportunity to scotch some of the scaremongering that we have heard in recent days about how the new shared prosperity fund will lead to a net loss for places such as Wales and a net gain for the south-east? The House of Commons Library has confirmed to me that this recent study is based on unfair comparisons.

Jake Berry: I would not question the authority, even-handedness and open-mindedness of House of Commons Library. I would direct my right hon. Friend to the debate that took place in Westminster Hall on 14 May, led by the hon. Member for Barnsley Central (Dan Jarvis), in which colleagues and the Government set out in considerable detail our ambition to drive jobs, growth and prosperity in all parts of our United Kingdom through this fund.

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): Research from the independent Conference of Peripheral Maritime Regions has shown that Scotland stands to lose nearly £1 billion of funding if the UK Government do not match EU funding after 2020. Given what the Minister has said about his responsibilities, will he tell us which of the 10 candidates for Prime Minister have given guarantees to replace every penny of this funding and retain Holyrood’s role in disbursing it?

Jake Berry: It is welcome that the hon. Gentleman wants to play such an active and full part in the Conservative leadership election, but he knows, as I do, that decisions about the UK shared prosperity fund, on quantum and all other matters, will be taken during the comprehensive spending review and the consultation. I would say to him that the Scottish Government must absolutely play their part in being an advocate for the areas of Scotland that share this Government’s ambition to create jobs, wealth and growth through the UK shared prosperity fund, mirroring in many ways what is being achieved through European funds.

Drew Hendry: The public will have heard that answer, which is clearly insufficient and not good enough. The highlands and islands alone stand to lose £180 million, and the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs has said that he is willing to grab control of devolved spending. Is it any wonder that the Scottish public are now looking to Scotland being an independent nation state in Europe with an equal seat at the table, rather than this shambles?

Jake Berry: Well, Mr Speaker, if you want a strong demonstration that this country is better together, you need look no further than the highlands and islands growth deal, a partnership between the UK Government and the Scottish Government that is changing lives for people across the highlands and islands. That is a demonstration in one Government policy of why this Union should stay together.

Small Businesses: Scotland

7. Bill Grant (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (Con): What recent steps he has taken to support small businesses in Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock constituency.

15. Chris Law (Dundee West) (SNP): What recent discussions he has had with the Secretary of State for Scotland on support for small and medium-sized enterprises in Scotland.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Kelly Tolhurst): We engage regularly with the Secretary of State for Scotland on how we can achieve our industrial strategy aim to make the UK the best place to start and grow a business. The British Business Bank has supported 5,219 small and medium-sized enterprises in Scotland with more than £898 million to date. My hon. Friend the Member for Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock (Bill Grant) will be pleased to know that the bank’s start-up loans programme has delivered 61 loans totalling more than £253,000 in his constituency.
Bill Grant: As the House is aware, high streets are under pressure as a result of the changing retail landscape. Sadly, in Ayr, we lost our independent department store, Hourstons, earlier this year. It had been trading for 123 years. Will my hon. Friend outline what support is available to local businesses to ensure that they can remain at the heart of their communities?

Kelly Tolhurst: I thank my hon. Friend for highlighting the loss of a department store in his constituency. Let me assure him that the Minister has responsibility for high streets—the Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, my hon. Friend the Member for Rossendale and Darwen (Jake Berry)—and I am committed to working together to support the businesses at the heart of our communities across the country and to deliver the £1.6 billion plan for our high streets, including via the Retail Sector Council. The Ayrshire growth deal, with £103 million of UK Government funding, in my hon. Friend’s constituency—of which he has been a keen supporter—will also help the wider business community.

Chris Law: The business growth accelerator suspends rates for new builds or renovated properties for 12 months, and this Scotland-wide policy has encouraged new development across the country. Is it not the case that while Brexit is set to push the economy off the cliff, the Scottish National party is the only party supporting Scotland’s small businesses?

Kelly Tolhurst: It will come as no surprise to the hon. Gentleman that I disagree with him. UK Government investment in city region and growth deals in Scotland is now more than £1.3 billion, and there are 48,000 more enterprises operating in Scotland than there were in 2010. We are committed to delivering economic growth and business support across the country, but as the hon. Gentleman will know, it was his Government’s decision to bring in the highest taxes—

Mr Speaker: Order. I call David Linden.

21. [911263] David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): Some employees in small businesses, including those in Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock, will face the prospect of having a child born premature or sick, so why will the Minister not release the findings of the recent Government review into parental leave for such issues, which would help families in Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock and right across these islands?

Kelly Tolhurst: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for raising this topic. Following the Department’s internal review, we will now consult on the options to provide further support to the parents of premature, sick and multiple babies before the end of the summer. The consultation will be informed by the review’s findings, and I am grateful to Bliss, The Smallest Things and the many Members across the House who have spoken to me and lobbied on the matter.

Greenhouse Gas Emissions: Targets


The Minister for Energy and Clean Growth (Chris Skidmore): I join colleagues from across the House in welcoming the Committee’s seminal report on net zero. The UK’s record in tackling climate change is world leading, and the CCC’s report sets out a path for us to continue that legacy by becoming the first major economy to legislate to end our contribution to global warming. The Government recognise the need for urgent action on climate change, which is why we asked for this advice last October, and we will respond in a timeframe that reflects that urgency.

Layla Moran: I am sure that, like me, many Members receive beautifully handwritten letters from schoolchildren. Nine-year-old Elizabeth from West Oxford Community Primary School says:

“Words are not enough—urgent action is needed within the next decade if the world is going to survive as we know it.”

Out of the mouths of babes—but not all of them are learning about climate change. Will the Minister work with the Department for Education to ensure that all children, including those at key stages 1 and 2, learn about this incredibly important matter?

Chris Skidmore: I certainly have the opportunity to do so, because I also sit in the Department for Education as Universities Minister. The Secretary of State for Education is keen to highlight that climate change is taught in schools, but I will pass on the hon. Lady’s comments about ensuring that the next generation continue to learn about the urgency with which we need to tackle climate change.

Colin Clark (Gordon) (Con): We recently went for two weeks without using coal in our electricity mix, largely due to the use of lower greenhouse gas-emitting natural gas. Does my hon. Friend remain committed to the North sea oil and gas industry, which supports 120,000 jobs in Scotland and 280,000 across the United Kingdom as a whole?

Chris Skidmore: My hon. Friend hits upon a crucial point. If we are to have clean growth and a sustainable pathway towards net zero, we must ensure that we continue to use gas. We have weaned ourselves off coal, and it is remarkable that we went 18 days and seven weeks without using coal—not that I was counting. Anyone can follow the reduction in the use of coal over the past seven years, which has happened because we have been able to adapt and put gas back on the market. Going forward, we will have to ensure that we invest in a multitude of energy sources, including solar and other renewables, but gas will be a vital part of the mix in a sustainable transition.

23. [911265] Paul Blomfield (Sheffield Central) (Lab): Last month, this House declared a climate emergency and called on the Government to “set ambitious, short-term targets for the roll-out of renewable and low carbon energy and transport”. Will the Minister outline what he has done to set and achieve those targets?
Chris Skidmore: It is incredibly important that the Government are committed to publishing an energy White Paper this summer. As for targets, we have already taken forward the grand challenges of setting out missions for transport and buildings, for example. Clean buildings are incredibly important, because 28 million buildings make up 25% of all carbon emissions. We are beginning that work, and we will be putting bids together in the run-up to the spending review that reflect the grand challenges and those missions.

Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree with the CBI, which says that the Labour party’s plans to renationalise the energy system are already harming our efforts to tackle climate change? What commitments will he make about continuing to reduce our emissions to zero?

Mr Speaker: Yes, but do not bang on about the Opposition’s policy. That is not the Minister’s responsibility. We can hear a brief word about the Government’s policy. The trouble with following briefings from outside organisations is that they can lead Members astray.

Chris Skidmore: I think the key point is that the reforms that have led to the reduction in the use of coal over the past seven years have been taken forward using a market-based strategy. That was highlighted last week in a report by the International Energy Agency, which praised the UK’s commitments to addressing climate change by using market-based approaches.

Rachel Reeves (Leeds West) (Lab): We have a moral obligation to bring our carbon emissions down to net zero, and there are real economic and social benefits in doing so. Although the Chancellor has expressed his scepticism, despite the fact that we face a climate catastrophe, will the Minister offer real leadership and commit the Government to supporting the Bill I will be presenting to the House this afternoon to bring down our carbon emissions to net zero by 2050?

Chris Skidmore: I will certainly be present to listen to the hon. Lady’s Bill. I want to make that commitment, but I recognise that across this House, across all parties, we cannot do this simply by taking a party political approach. It was her Government that passed the landmark Climate Change Act 2008, which introduced the carbon budgets that now allow us to adapt the legislation to look towards net zero.

There must be a whole Government approach, and I want to be able to work towards that. When it comes to looking at carbon budgets and the baselines, those are specific issues on which I want to work with the Committee on Climate Change. I look forward to hearing the hon. Lady’s Bill, on which we all want to move forward together.

Barry Gardiner (Brent North) (Lab): I welcome the Minister to his new responsibilities while the right hon. Member for Devizes (Claire Perry) is on compassionate leave. We hope the right hon. Lady makes a speedy return to the House.

Assuming the Government will do the right thing and legislate for net zero by 2050, in line with the recommendations of the Committee on Climate Change, why has the Minister decided to weaken the third carbon budget by carrying over surplus emissions from the second carbon budget, against the committee’s specific advice?

While the Minister is at the Dispatch Box, perhaps he will confirm that net zero can be achieved within the current cost envelope for an 80% reduction of 1% to 2% of GDP. The Chancellor’s claim of £1 trillion spuriously adds together all the costs over the next 21 years and fails to subtract any of the benefits or savings.

Chris Skidmore: It is important to put on record the content of the Government’s letter to the Committee on Climate Change. After careful consideration of the committee’s advice, the Government decided to hold in reserve a small proportion of over performance from carbon budget 2—88 megatonnes of a total over performance of 384 megatonnes. The reserve will act solely as a contingency. [Interruption.] I have 384 megatonnes, but I will happily correct the record when I look at the statistics. Eighty-eight megatonnes are being held in reserve and act solely as a contingency against changes in the baseline. This will be released once it is clear that it will not be needed to address any technical changes to the baseline. We have also asked the Committee on Climate Change to look at those technical changes. We would not have asked the committee to take forward work on net zero if we did not believe we will be able to implement this.

When it comes to the cost reduction, I entirely agree with the hon. Gentleman that costs have come down on technology and will continue to come down. The Committee on Climate Change has made it clear that it can be done within the envelope of 1% to 2% of GDP, as set out for the 80% reduction.

Post Office Services: Rural Areas

9. Derek Thomas (St Ives) (Con): What steps is he taking to ensure that people can access post office services in rural areas.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Kelly Tolhurst): The Government absolutely recognise the importance of post offices to rural communities across the UK. There are over 11,500 post offices nationwide, and Government subsidy safeguards post offices, which can be the last shop in the village, so that they can continue to serve their communities. The Post Office delivered almost £10 million of investment via the community fund between 2014 and 2018 to facilitate rural community branches to invest in their retail businesses.

Derek Thomas: I thank the Minister for her response but, unfortunately, there is one fewer post office today, as Porthleven post office in west Cornwall closes. Six months ago, the Minister said from the Dispatch Box that, guided by the Post Office, a mobile service will be available in west Cornwall to deal with the nine post offices that have so far closed and are now no longer available. Can she please tell me when we will get that mobile service so that people can once again access post office services?

Kelly Tolhurst: I thank my hon. Friend, who has long been a campaigner for post offices in his region. It is true that west Cornwall communities have been unduly
inconvenienced, and he is right that the Post Office is now waiting for Cornwall Council to issue a formal permit to formalise the agreement. I have been assured that, due to the closure of Porthleven post office this morning, there will be a weekly mobile service in place very shortly. I just want to highlight that, with such a diverse network in many different locations and settings, it is true that some post offices will close due to unforeseen circumstances and lots of other reasons. It is important that the Post Office keeps up with that challenge to make sure our communities are well served.

Chris Evans (Islwyn) (Lab/Co-op): With banks closing their rural branches, post offices are the last places where people can access cash. However, as I know from the experience of Pontllanfraith in my constituency, it is increasingly difficult to replace postmasters who give up their tenancy. What can the Government do to work with the Post Office to encourage more people to take up postmaster and postmistress jobs?

Kelly Tolhurst: I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising that matter. A key part of what the Post Office has done is to renegotiate the banking framework, which, seen remuneration for postmasters increase significantly—it has doubled, and trebled in some cases. On Thursday, I will be hosting a meeting with Post Office Ltd and the National Federation of SubPostmasters, where we are hoping to tackle some of the issues about the economic viability of sub-post offices.

25. [911267] Daniel Kawczynski (Shrewsbury and Atcham) (Con): Condoor post office in my constituency is a classic example of the very important services that these companies provide to our constituents in rural areas. Now that we are moving towards running a balanced budget, will the Minister work with the Exchequer to ensure that every assistance is provided through the taxation system for these very important post offices?

Kelly Tolhurst: My hon. Friend is right: Government have a responsibility to ensure that we work together across Government to ensure that services can be provided through the post office. We must celebrate the fact that the Post Office, for the first time in a number of years, has become profitable. We have the most stable network in decades. Under the last Labour Government, over 7,000 branches shut. We are making sure that we maintain the number of post offices; in fact, we have opened 400 since 2017.

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): One of the silver linings of the decision of the high street banks to abandon our town centres is that post offices are now able to pick up that slack. The Minister said earlier that she was meeting with Post Office Ltd and that the income that postmasters get from banking transactions has trebled. The reality is that they are getting a few pence for every £1,000 of work that they do for the banks, so a trebling is still a pittance. Will she ensure that the banks remunerate our post offices for, basically, doing the work that they have left behind?

Kelly Tolhurst: The hon. Gentleman makes a good point about banks moving away from our high streets and the post offices picking up the slack. That is why I am proud of what Post Office Ltd has done in negotiating this new framework. I disagree with him when he says that what postmasters receive is a pittance. In fact, the remuneration has doubled or trebled; it has increased significantly. The Post Office will also be bringing that forward: it will be remunerating postmasters from October, rather than January, when the framework comes into place.

Gill Furniss (Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough) (Lab): The new report by a representative group of sub-postmasters notes that a fifth of sub-postmasters are planning to leave the profession, due to increasing financial pressures—indeed we have heard, from different sources, of postmasters earning well below the minimum wage. The result could be the closure of 2,500 branches, threatening the viability and sustainability of the entire network. What discussions has the Minister had with the Post Office to ensure that sub-postmasters are getting a fair deal? Will she urge the Post Office to look at contingency plans to ensure that such closures do not occur?

Kelly Tolhurst: It is true that Members across the House care deeply about our Post Office, and so do the Government. The number of branches remains at its most stable for a decade. To give the hon. Lady some reassurance, my meetings on Thursday will include one of the formal meetings held quarterly—with ministerial oversight—between Post Office Ltd and the National Federation of SubPostmasters to tackle some of the key issues.

I reiterate at the Dispatch Box that Post Office Ltd will be undertaking a review of pay, which will report back in the autumn. I agree that any sub-postmaster who wants to take on a post office franchise must be able to do so in the knowledge that it is financially viable. We are supporting them, and the Post Office is supporting them, to serve their communities.

Leaving the EU: Scottish Business Support

10. Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): What recent discussions he has had with the Chancellor of the Exchequer on fiscal support for businesses in Scotland preparing for the UK leaving the EU. [911252]

The Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Greg Clark): The UK Government have provided the Scottish Government with almost £100 million to prepare for EU exit, alongside funding to support businesses with training and IT improvements. As we have heard in this question session, we have also supported businesses in Scotland through the city deals programme, including over £100 million for the Ayrshire growth deal in the hon. Lady’s constituency, which I know she welcomes.

Dr Whitford: I do welcome that, but an Ernst & Young report shows that, although 74% of Scottish firms have taken steps to get ready for Brexit, only 8% feel fully prepared. As 30% of manufactured goods go to the EU, will the Secretary of State accept the Institute of Directors’ call for £750 million to provide a Brexit advice service for small firms?

Greg Clark: I work closely with the Institute of Directors and other business organisations to make sure that information is available to their members and others.
We will continue to do that over the months ahead, but it remains my ambition that we should have a deal that allows us to continue the successful trade that the hon. Lady mentions.

Mr Edward Vaizey (Wantage) (Con): Hear, hear! Well said.

Mr Speaker: Contain yourself, man. I am always grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for the provision of the voice of Wantage.

Solar Power

11. Clive Lewis (Norwich South) (Lab): What plans he has to help ensure that solar power is (a) accessible to and (b) affordable for all households.

19. Douglas Ross (Moray) (Con): What plans he has to help ensure that solar power is (a) accessible to and (b) affordable for all households.

20. Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): What plans he has to help ensure that solar power is (a) accessible to and (b) affordable for all households.

The Minister for Energy and Clean Growth (Chris Skidmore): I am pleased to inform hon. Members that yesterday the Government launched their smart export guarantee, which will ensure that all small-scale generators are paid for the power they export to the grid. Supported by Government investment, residential solar installations are now 50% cheaper than they were in 2011 and, alongside technologies such as batteries, will help consumers to export energy to the grid when it is needed, reducing their bills and making solar more accessible and affordable than ever before.

Clive Lewis: With all due respect, only this Government could dress up a 94% collapse in domestic solar installations as a success. They now plan to slap 20% VAT on solar and storage and to replace the certainty of the feed-in tariff export payments with a lick-and-a-promise scheme with no certain payment rates and no guaranteed periods. Why does the Minister not just admit that, as ever, the Tories always side with big and dirty rather than with clean and local?

Chris Skidmore: The hon. Gentleman mentioned the drop in solar installations, which came about at the end of the feed-in tariff scheme. March was a record month for installations in the last two years, as we saw a rush for applications before the scheme closed. We had a question earlier about fuel poverty, and the point about the feed-in tariff is that, although it was important at the time and helped 850,000 people to use solar panels, it was going to cost £30 billion, and it is important to recognise that several suppliers are beginning to offer trial export tariffs, either in line with the wholesale price or at the same level or higher than the feed-in tariff export guarantee rate. Those suppliers include Octopus and Bulb, which have welcomed the changes. It is important that the policy can develop so that we can make sure that we see future development.

Mr Speaker: Lateral thinking, I say to the hon. Member for North West Leicestershire (Andrew Bridgen). Solar power and engineering are not altogether unrelated; with a degree of imagination, the hon. Gentleman could shoehorn his inquiry into this matter.

22. Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Con): Thank you, Mr Speaker.

Does my hon. Friend agree that we should be doing more to enhance technical education and engineering, and that one of the best ways to do that will be with T-levels? What impact does he think they will have?

Chris Skidmore: There are currently around 400,000 green jobs in the UK, and that number could more than quadruple to 2 million by 2030, so it is vital that we invest in skills. One of my priorities is to set out our mission to invest in technology for the future.

Albert Owen (Ynys Môn) (Lab): Solar power is an important part of the energy mix. What plans do the Government have to help community groups to ensure that community buildings are built to be self-sufficient by producing their own electricity and selling to the grid, and to put solar panels on the roofs of Government buildings?

Chris Skidmore: There are a number of pilots on community buildings that we will be taking forward but, specifically, the smart export guarantee ensures that providers with up to 5 MW of production of solar for many of the 60% of households that hope one day to get photovoltaic and battery storage, so will the Minister meet me urgently to discuss the matter to ensure that the solar industry gets this support from the Government?
electricity can export back to the grid. If we consider Blackfriars railway station—there is about 5 MW there—we can see the opportunity for community halls and community infrastructures to sell their energy back to the grid.

**Business Growth: North of England**

12. **Lucy Powell** (Manchester Central) (Lab/Co-op): What steps he is taking to support business growth in the north of England.

**Mr Speaker:** Order.

**Jake Berry:** I agree with the hon. Lady that people like me and her, who have been born and brought up in the north of England for our entire lives, can see that European structural funds have made a real difference. That is why this Government, with their UK shared prosperity fund, are absolutely committed to driving jobs and growth not least across the north of England. On the consultation on the shared prosperity fund, 500 stakeholders have been consulted so far at 25 events and that has included consultation by me with the northern metro mayors and all other mayors. I look forward to working with the new North of Tyne Mayor in Newcastle not least on this but also to discuss how he can spend £345 million—

**Mr Speaker:** Order.

**Topical Questions**

T1. [911268] **Derek Thomas** (St Ives) (Con): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

**The Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Greg Clark):** Since our previous questions, we have launched the west midlands local industrial strategy in Coventry, building on the region’s reputation for excellence in low-emissions vehicles, with further funding for the UK Battery Industrialisation Centre. Shortly after the recommendation by the Committee on Climate Change that we legislate to reach net zero emissions by 2050, Britain enjoyed its first ever coal-free fortnight since the industrial revolution. We will make our response to the committee’s report shortly to reaffirm our commitment to leadership in this important endeavour.

**Derek Thomas:** Most of us have hospitals, schools, council buildings and police stations in our constituencies. What more can the Government do to encourage the use of renewable energy in those buildings?

**Greg Clark:** My hon. Friend makes an excellent point on behalf of one of the sunnier parts of the country. The public sector energy efficiency loans scheme is open to public bodies so that they are able to invest in just technology. I will ensure that he has the full details of that scheme, which might also interest the hon. Member for Ynys Môn (Albert Owen), given his question.

T4. [911273] **Matthew Pennycook** (Greenwich and Woolwich) (Lab): The International Development Secretary recently said that he wants to double the UK’s current £1.1 billion commitment to the UN green climate fund. As the UK is yet to do so, will the Minister who has temporary responsibility for our engagement with the UN climate talks assure us today that it is the Government’s intention to commit additional money to the fund?

**The Minister for Energy and Clean Growth (Chris Skidmore):** Obviously, any decision on future funds will be made within the spending review, but I can absolutely say that it is vital that we work cross-departmentally to look at how we can harness all the resources of Government towards tackling climate change. The Secretary of State for International Development has made that commitment personally, and I can double down on that commitment to ensure that we tackle climate change in the poorest countries in the world.
Andrew Griffiths (Burton) (Con): The Office for Product Safety and Standards undertook a thorough review of the modification of Whirlpool tumble dryers. However, there still remain great concerns about not only the straightness of Whirlpool, but whether people have unsafe products in their homes. Can the Minister update us on what is happening in relation to Whirlpool?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Kelly Tolhurst): I recognise the key role that my hon. Friend played in instigating the review when he was in post. Consumer safety is a Government priority and I assure him that we have kept Whirlpool's action under review. I can tell the House that we have informed Whirlpool of our intention to serve a recall notice as the next step of the regulatory process. This is unprecedented action.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): I have two universities in my constituency that work very closely with businesses to develop technology. Can the Minister assure me that the Augar review will not lead to funding cuts at these universities, as they get funding from different sources?

Chris Skidmore: The Government have been clear in our response to the Augar review that we want to reflect on its recommendations. We will take this forward as part of the spending review while the post-18 review reaches its conclusions. I entirely agree with the hon. Gentleman that the future of research in this country is about ensuring that universities act as magnets to draw business in. Just yesterday, I attended the launch of the University of Bath’s Institute for Advanced Automotive Propulsion Systems at the Bristol and Bath Science Park. It is absolutely right that we must cherish universities' research capabilities.

Mr Speaker: I call Andrea Jenkyns. Oh dear; she has beetled out of the Chamber. I therefore call Peter Aldous.

T5. [911274] Peter Aldous (Waveney) (Con): With town centres such as that of Lowestoft facing serious challenges, will the Minister confirm that she is working with the Treasury and the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government to put in place a fairer system of business taxation?

Kelly Tolhurst: My officials are in regular contact with the Treasury and MHCLG to represent the views of business. Last week, we welcomed the Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, my hon. Friend the Member for Rossendale and Darwen (Jake Berry), to BEIS so he now holds ministerial roles in this Department and in MHCLG, as Minister for the northern powerhouse and local growth. This further strengthens our relationship. We look forward to continuing to work together to support these businesses and make proper representations to the Treasury.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Andrew Stephenson): I regularly speak with a range of steel companies. Since 2013 the Government have provided more than £291 million to the steel sector for the costs of renewables and climate change policies, including over £53 million compensation during 2018.

Julian Sturdy (York Outer) (Con): York Instruments, based in my constituency, is doing research and development work developing advanced medical devices, attracting £10 million of private investment from the US to sustain 41 high-skilled jobs. Can the Government assure me that they are doing everything possible to facilitate this kind of investment, which can be very difficult for some small businesses to navigate?

Greg Clark: I can indeed, and I commend my hon. Friend for bringing this matter to the attention of the House. The life sciences sector deal has provided a means for investment to take place right across the sector. In fact, that deal has been so successful that we are on the second version of it, and further investments will be announced shortly.

Ruth George (High Peak) (Lab): What has the Department done to monitor the growth of short-hours contracts in supermarkets, which have led 76% of USDAW members on low pay to rely on unsecured loans to pay everyday bills, with 63% believing that financial worries are affecting their mental health? Will the Secretary of State meet USDAW to discuss its recent survey in detail?

Kelly Tolhurst: I am happy to meet the hon. Lady to discuss this, but I would like to reaffirm the Government’s commitment to upgrade workers’ rights, protecting the most vulnerable workers. Our legal framework already ensures that employers should always treat their employees fairly, and our good work plan will introduce the biggest upgrade in workers’ rights in a generation. In the retail sector specifically, the industry-led Retail Sector Council has identified that employment is a key priority for the workstream and we will be discussing that on 20 June.

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): At the last BEIS questions, my right hon. Friend the Business Secretary gave a positive response to my suggestion of a wide-scale roll-out of solar on every public sector building—every school, hospital and prison. Is he interested in taking that proposal forward?

Greg Clark: I am indeed. I set out to my hon. Friend a means by which that can be financed. In our response to the Climate Change Committee’s report, we will be setting out further measures that we can take to accelerate our decarbonisation.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Will the Minister meet USD A W to discuss its recent survey in detail?

Kelly Tolhurst: Absolutely. Access to free cashpoints is an important part of our high streets and I personally, as a constituency MP, have made representations on that to the banking sector. However, through the post office network, we already have a great deal for offering cashpoints in post offices with the Bank of Ireland.
I hope to make sure that Post Office Ltd extends that service. We continue to campaign and talk to the Treasury to make sure that we still offer those cashpoint services.

Bim Afolami (Hitchin and Harpenden) (Con): The Secretary of State knows that Rothamsted Research in Harpenden does amazing work in agricultural science. Many people at Rothamsted have expressed to me their concern about the nature and the amount of science funding after we leave the European Union. Will the Secretary of State give me an update as to where we have got to on that as a Government?

Greg Clark: I completely recognise the excellence at Rothamsted, of which my hon. Friend is a great champion. One of the advantages of concluding a deal with the rest of the European Union is that we will be able to continue to participate in science projects that are of disproportionate benefit to the UK.

Jenny Chapman (Darlington) (Lab): Yesterday, I spoke to the chief executive of Arcadia Group about the Top Shop, Top Man and Dorothy Perkins stores in Darlington. Tomorrow, there is a CVA—company voluntary arrangement—meeting where we could see the loss of 18,000 jobs nationwide. I know that the Government cannot intervene in the process, but what are they going to do to protect communities who could be affected by this decision?

Kelly Tolhurst: The hon. Lady raises an important point about the viability of some of the retail outlets that are operating on our high streets. She is absolutely right that it is concerning when we are looking at any closures of retail names on our high streets. We stand ready to do what we can, along with my colleagues in MHCLG, if closures occur. As I have already outlined, we are working with the Retail Sector Council. We are committed to making sure that we work with the retail sector and high streets to make sure that we can truly grow our high streets and protect retail for the future.

Mr Edward Vaizey (Wantage) (Con): A small amount of funding would unlock the growth of Harwell campus in my constituency via the Nuclear Decommissioning Authority. Will the Secretary of State, who knows Harwell campus well, meet me and the NDA there to discuss how we can get on and build Greg Clark Park and Theresa May Way, and drive this successful science campus to help growth post Brexit?

Greg Clark: I have no aspirations to such recognition, but I am very happy to meet my right hon. Friend to discuss the further opportunities for what is one of the foremost innovation campuses in the whole world.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): The Scottish Government’s consultation on fireworks closed last month, having received 16,000 responses. Can the Minister update us on the UK Government’s action on fireworks, having received 16,000 responses. Can the Minister undertake a review, and I will happily update her when we have the results.

Kelly Tolhurst: I would be grateful to discuss the consultation outcomes with the hon. Lady. As she will know, the Office for Product Safety and Standards is undertaking a review, and I will happily update her when we have the results.

Lee Rowley (North East Derbyshire) (Con): At a recent Public Accounts Committee sitting, the issue of fracking and specifically the decommissioning of fracking sites was raised, and the answers from senior civil servants were not great. Will the Minister meet me, so that we can discuss those concerns in more detail?

Chris Skidmore: I know that this issue affects my hon. Friend’s constituency directly and that he is a dedicated constituency MP, so I will happily meet him to discuss it.

Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby) (Lab): The loss of Novartis from the South Humber bank will lead to 400 job losses. Will the Secretary of State appoint one of his Ministers to a taskforce, to find a new buyer for the site?

Greg Clark: As the hon. Lady knows, I am always keen to ensure that we take every step we can to preserve the continuity of skilled people, and I would be happy to do that.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): The excellent new steel charter. Will he update the House on the progress the Minister has been a strong supporter of the new UK steel charter. Will he update the House on the progress he has made in getting it adopted across Government?

Andrew Stephenson: I thank my hon. Friend for his question. After signing the UK steel charter on behalf of my Department, I have written to several other Departments, encouraging them to support this excellent initiative.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): Only a fifth of York Central development is earmarked for economic development, which will seriously curtail the opportunities for business growth, inward investment and good jobs for York. Following my discussions with the Minister and stakeholders, will he consider a new proposal for York Central?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Jake Berry): The hon. Lady is aware that this planning decision is currently with the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government for determination. She has had the opportunity to meet me and make representations, and I will meet my hon. Friend the Member for York Outer (Julian Sturdy) later today.

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): Many of my constituents who are customers of HELMS—Home Energy and Lifestyle Management Systems—have been utterly failed by ineptly regulated green energy incentive schemes. The decision to remove the feed-in tariff for solar energy microgeneration, in tandem with the proposal to apply VAT to more energy-saving materials, including solar panels, will do nothing to support the public, the industry or the environment. Will the Minister reconsider those retrograde steps, which fly in the face of our climate emergency declaration?

Chris Skidmore: I simply disagree that this is a retrograde step. The smart export guarantee, which we announced yesterday and will legislate for, will create a market to ensure that small providers of renewable energy will be able to sell back their electricity to the grid and make
a profit. As I have mentioned, feed-in tariffs will cost £30 billion over their lifetime, putting £14 on the bills of every household. If that is what the hon. Gentleman wants, as opposed to creating a market that will benefit those using solar panels, I do not know why he is here.

**Gareth Snell** (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab/Co-op): The Secretary of State is no doubt waiting for the new Prime Minister to authorise him to announce the UK ceramic sector deal. While that is being worked out, what conversations is he having with the Department for International Trade about supporting the anti-dumping measures that are currently being considered in Europe?

**Greg Clark**: As the hon. Gentleman knows, I am a strong supporter of the proposed sector deal, and in the draft tariff schedule that was published particular attention was given to the strong representations of the ceramics industry.

**Stella Creasy** (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): I have been inundated with complaints from local residents about a second-hand car sales company in my community that variously goes by the names BD Trade Sales, Leabridge Motors, Diamond Motors and many more. Members may be aware of its work from programmes such as “Rogue Traders”, “Don’t Get Done, Get Dom”, “Watchdog” and “The Sheriffs Are Coming”. Despite the evidence about how it is ripping off consumers, the council, trading standards and the police have not been able to stop it. Will the Minister meet me to talk about what we can do to hold these phoenix companies to account, so that we get dodgy cars off the roads and get consumers a better deal?

**Kelly Tolhurst**: I am grateful for the hon. Lady’s offer to meet me to discuss this issue, which I am keen to do. I hope that when we are in a position to make announcements in the consumer White Paper, we will be able to do exactly that—tackle some of the consumer detriment that we see across the country. I look forward to meeting her to discuss that.

**Anna Soubry** (Broxtowe) (Change UK): The Secretary of State has quite properly described a no-deal Brexit as “a disaster” for British business. Will he commit to continuing to do everything he can to prevent a no-deal Brexit, whoever the Conservative party choose as our next Prime Minister?

**Greg Clark**: I strongly believe that it is very much in our interests to have a deal that allows us to continue to trade with the rest of the European Union. The voices in countless industries could not be clearer that they depend for their prosperity on that, and I will do everything I can to represent that view in Government in the interests of the livelihoods of millions of people right across the country.
Free TV Licences: Over-75s

12.45 pm

Tom Watson (West Bromwich East) (Lab) (Urgent Question): To ask the Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport to make a statement on free TV licences for the over-75s.

The Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Jeremy Wright): The BBC is a fundamental part of the social and economic fabric of this country. It is important for people of all ages, but particularly for older people, who value television as a way to stay connected with the world.

The Government recognised the importance of the licence fee when we agreed a funding settlement with the BBC in 2015 to provide the BBC with financial certainty to plan over the long term. We agreed to take action further to boost the BBC’s income by requiring iPlayer users to have a TV licence, and we unfroze the licence fee for the first time since 2010 by guaranteeing that it will rise each year in line with inflation.

In return, we agreed that responsibility for the over-75 licence fee concession would transfer to the BBC in June 2020. We agreed a phased transition to help the BBC with its financial planning as it did so. This was a fair deal for the BBC. At the time, the BBC director-general said the settlement represented “a strong deal for the BBC”, which provided “financial stability”.

The BBC is operationally independent, so the announcement yesterday is very much its decision, but taxpayers want to see the BBC using its substantial licence fee income appropriately to ensure it delivers for UK audiences, and that includes showing restraint on salaries for senior staff. In 2017–18, the BBC received over £3.8 billion in licence fee income—more than ever before. The BBC is also making over £1 billion a year from commercial work, such as selling content abroad, which can be reinvested. So we are very disappointed that the BBC will not protect free television licences for all viewers aged 75 and over.

The BBC received views from over 190,000 people as part of its broader public consultation, which sought opinions on a number of options. With a number of proposals on the table, the BBC has taken the most narrowly defined reform option. I firmly believe that the BBC can and should do more to support older people, and I am now looking to it to make clear exactly how it will do that.

Tom Watson: We found out yesterday just how little a Tory manifesto promise is worth. I have read these words in the Chamber before, but I will read them again:

“We will maintain all…pensioner benefits, including free bus passes, eye tests, prescriptions and TV licences, for the duration of this parliament.”

No ifs, no buts, no waiving—a promise made in 2017 to voters by the Conservative party.

Today, 3.7 million over-75s find that promise in tatters. They have been betrayed, and it is shameful. The Government have the breathtaking gall to blame the BBC for this mess, but passing the buck will not work. The BBC is not the Department for Work and Pensions. Public broadcasters should never be responsible for social policy. My hon. Friend the Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) warned in 2015 that this was a “smash and grab raid” by the Government on the BBC. He was right, and now older people are paying the price. There are 1.8 million over-75s who live completely alone, and they will lose their TV licence because of the announcement. How can the Secretary of State justify that? We cannot means-test for loneliness or social inclusion.

What about the very poorest in our nation who are eligible for pension credit but do not claim it? How will the Secretary of State protect them? Two of the Tory leadership candidates—the former Leader of the House and the Home Secretary—have committed to overturning the decision. Perhaps they know how it will look to the rest of the world when we start jailing pensioners who cannot or will not pay the licence fee.

I would like to share some figures with the House: 4,240 older people in Uxbridge will lose their TV licence; 5,970 people in West Suffolk will be affected; and 6,730—the number in South West Surrey. The right hon. Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson) wants to give a tax cut to the very richest, but he will not lift a finger to defend pensioners. The Health Secretary says he cares about social care, but he will not defend pensioners either. The Foreign Secretary tells us that he cares about the chronically lonely, but he will not defend even the loneliest pensioners. Is it therefore any surprise that the country’s pensioners are asking whether the leadership candidates will honour their word and keep their promise, or break it?

This is a test not just of leadership, but of honour, integrity and truthfulness. Does the Secretary of State agree that someone who cannot keep a promise is not fit to be Prime Minister? It is as simple as that.

Jeremy Wright: Well, Mr Speaker, it is not quite as simple as that. The hon. Gentleman knows I have a good deal of respect for his passion and his consistency. I accept that he has always argued that it was wrong to transfer the responsibility to the BBC, but the arguments he makes today were better suited to our debate on the Digital Economy Act 2017. Indeed, he made those arguments then—I accept that. However, the argument was had, a vote was conducted and a result was recorded. Consequently, the BBC has the responsibility for deciding what to do about the licence fee concession. That is a fact.

The hon. Gentleman raised several concerns and I will try to deal with them. First, he is rightly concerned about those who are elderly and lonely. I know that he will recognise that the Government have not relied on the BBC to do something about those who are lonely. We are the first Government to appoint a Minister for loneliness, to have a loneliness strategy and to commit the Building Connections fund. The Government take loneliness seriously and have put our money where our mouth is.

The hon. Gentleman also raised concerns about the poorest pensioners. Let me say two things on that. First, as he knows, the Government have put considerable effort into raising pensioners’ living standards. We have increased the basic state pension by significant amounts. It is today £675 higher than if it had simply been uprated by earnings since 2010. In cash terms, that is
£1,600 more for every pensioner. We take seriously the responsibility to look after those who do not have means and are pensioners. Again, we have put our money where our mouth is.

The hon. Gentleman made a good point about eligibility for pension credit. It is important that all those who are eligible claim it. That is exactly what we, too, believe should happen. My colleagues in the Department for Work and Pensions have been working hard on that. I and they expect the BBC to help us in that task by ensuring that, as the opportunity presents itself, people who do not yet claim pension credit but are entitled to it do so. I hope that we will have the hon. Gentleman’s support in that process.

It is important to stick to the facts and not to scare people unnecessarily. It is important to understand that the change will not happen immediately, but next year, and that those who are entitled to pension credit can still have a free TV licence. It is also important to understand that evasion of the licence fee is not an imprisonable offence. It is helpful if we do not mislead people on those points.

I have said that the Government have put their money where their mouth is in looking after the individuals about whom the hon. Gentleman is rightly concerned. The House and pensioners over the age of 75 have a right to expect the same of the Labour party. If the hon. Gentleman wishes to come here and express his outrage about the transfer of responsibility to the BBC and away from the taxpayer, does he accept that it should be transferred back? If so, where will the money come from? He is offering to commit to £500 million of extra public spending. We are all interested to know where it will come from.

Mr Edward Vaizey (Wantage) (Con): My right hon. and learned Friend knows that there is no job in the world I would like more than his. He will therefore be delighted by what I am about to say because it will preclude any future Conservative Prime Minister from giving me the job.

I was in the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport when the Treasury imposed the policy on the BBC to meet its £12 billion welfare target, which I doubt we have met and has long been forgotten. The Government should either take back the policy or support the BBC changes. They should not use weasel words to undermine the changes that the BBC has made. It is interesting that 40% of those over 75 subscribe to paid-for television services as well. We should support the BBC in making the changes.

Jeremy Wright: I respect my right hon. Friend’s experience in this matter. I am tempted to say that if he really wants my job, today would be a very good day for him to have it, but I do not think I will make that offer.

My right hon. Friend is right that the BBC’s decision must be respected, but we all have a right to express our view on the decision. It is a BBC decision—I have clearly accepted that; it is what the statute says—but we all have a right to express our view and I have been frank with the House in saying that I am disappointed that the BBC has not been able to do better. I think it still can do better and I intend to use the forthcoming period to persuade it to do so.

Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): As much as they try, Tory Ministers cannot wash their hands of this terrible decision. A Tory Chancellor, George Osborne, proposed handing responsibility for the licence fee concession to the BBC as part of a disastrous charter for the BBC. The Government knew exactly what they were doing and they knew that this would be the result.

The right hon. Member for Tatton (Ms McVey) has made the matter a Tory leadership issue, even if I have more chance of scoring the winner tonight in Belgium than she has of becoming Prime Minister. Every single Tory leadership candidate must answer the question: “Will you bring the TV licence fee concession back to the Government?” That is the only way pensioners will avoid losing out—some 300,000 in Scotland; 3,000 in Airdrie and Shotts. Age Scotland reckons that 76,000 pensioners in Scotland do not claim pension credit even though they are entitled to it.

In the light of that decision, what consideration has the Minister made of funding the BBC to reverse it? How does this decision square with the 2017 Tory party manifesto commitment that helped to elect the Minister, which promised to, and I quote from page 66, “maintain” pensioner benefits, “including free bus passes, eye tests, prescriptions and TV licences, for the duration of this Parliament”.

The Tories promised pensioners that their free TV licences would remain. They must honour that promise.

Jeremy Wright: The hon. Gentleman says that we should ask Conservative party leadership contenders whether they will bring this obligation back to the taxpayer. I hope that he will ask the same question of Opposition Front Benchers, and not just that question but the follow-up question: if they intend to do that, where will they find the money to pay for it? Will they cut elsewhere? Will they borrow more? That follow-up question must be asked of all those who argue that we should reverse course on what Parliament voted for in 2017.

The hon. Gentleman says that the Government knew what they were doing when this arrangement was made in 2015. I suggest that the BBC also knew what it was doing. It is important to remember what the BBC said at the time. Let me quote what the director-general of the BBC said on the “Today” programme after the deal was done in 2015:

“The Government’s decision here to put the cost of the over-75s on us has been more than matched by the deal coming back for the BBC.”

That is what he said. If we all enter these deals with our eyes open—we all should—we should all be responsible for the decisions we take.

Mr John Whittingdale (Maldon) (Con): May I respectfully say to my right hon. and learned Friend that when the decision was taken it was understood that this would be a possible outcome, not least because to maintain the existing concession would cost the BBC nearly £1 billion by the end of the charter period, which would mean either huge programme cuts or increasing the licence fee for the under-75s to nearly £200? Does he accept that restricting the concession to those over-75s on pension credit will provide help to elderly people on
low incomes, and if it is publicised properly, it should actually significantly increase the take-up of pension credit?

Jeremy Wright: Yes. My right hon. Friend’s last point is an important one. As I said earlier, it is important that we raise the take-up of pension credit. There are tens of thousands, if not hundreds of thousands, of older people in our society who are entitled to help they are not currently receiving. If the BBC can assist in that process, by getting the message across that they are entitled to that help and that they will be able to claim it, that would be a good thing. I entirely respect his experience in the process that has led up to this point. As I said earlier, I accept that there are hon. Members who feel passionately that the decision taken in 2017 was the wrong one. I understand that that is their view, but it was the decision taken, and as a result, this is a BBC decision to make.

Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab): While the then BBC management was extremely foolish to accept this albatross around their neck—we warned them at the time—I am absolutely aghast that the then Culture Secretary of State, defending the BBC, should stand up for Wantage (Mr Vaisey), seem to be washing their hands of the responsibility. The Secretary of State, defending the BBC, should stand up to the Treasury—extraordinary! The Secretary of State, defending the BBC, should stand up to the Treasury. Is it not the truth that this is nothing to do with the BBC? This is about a Government who have deliberately passed responsibility for what should be a social security issue on to our main public service broadcaster.

Jeremy Wright: I will not repeat what I have said about the decision and the process that was undertaken in 2017, but the right hon. Gentleman knows better than many people in this House how collective responsibility works. He knows that the Government stand behind decisions they make collectively.

Sarah Newton (Truro and Falmouth) (Con): I would like to put in a word for BBC local radio. We have talked a lot about television, but many of my constituents love BBC Radio Cornwall. That is paid for by the licence fee, as well as the World Service, which is an extraordinarily good broadcaster. Clearly, the BBC said at the time that it would be able to keep this concession in exchange for increases in the licence fee, and it does have £5 billion of income. I am really disappointed that the BBC is doing this to some of its core listeners, but I do think that it is important the Secretary of State does what the Prime Minister said yesterday, which is sit down with the BBC and sort this out.

Jeremy Wright: I can tell my hon. Friend. That is the only way. The Secretary of State should sit down with the BBC to decide the question, but we can have further conversations, and we should, about what else the BBC can do to help precisely the people the hon. Member for West Bromwich East (Tom Watson) raised at the outset, about whom we are all concerned: those who are elderly and those who rely on the television for all sorts of things.
that the BBC has to make a judgment about what to do with the BBC licence fee concession. It has made that judgment. We are all entitled to say what we think of it, but in the end it was its judgment to make from the point at which that 2017 legislation was passed.

**Sir William Cash** (Stone) (Con): Does the Secretary of State accept that the BBC’s income is about £5.5 billion a year? That is where the perspective needs to be presented. It is outrageous that this decision has been made in the manner in which it has been made. It is not necessary. Furthermore, I believe that the Government, under a new Prime Minister, must review the situation. Does the Secretary of State agree that the BBC does not give value for money and requires radical reform?

**Jeremy Wright:** No, I cannot entirely agree with my hon. Friend on that. I think that the BBC presents huge benefits to our society and to the nation beyond our shores. It is right that the BBC receives substantial income—I should say in the BBC’s defence that it has important responsibilities to carry out with that income and we expect it to do so—but it is also right that we expect the BBC to use its imagination and work hard to find ways to supplement what it has now agreed to do in the interests of older people, about whom we are all concerned.

**Mr Gregory Campbell** (East Londonderry) (DUP): I speak in support of the renewed campaign to retain the free TV licence for over-75s. Four years ago, the BBC agreed to the new regime, as the Secretary of State said. The demographics of the over-75s have not changed much since that time and nor has the take-up of pension credit. Four years ago, did the BBC raise either of those issues, which it now complains about to the rest of us?

**Jeremy Wright:** Of course, I was not present for those negotiations, so I cannot tell the hon. Gentleman that. What I can say is that they were not conducted at gunpoint. They were conducted by two sides who ought to have understood the consequences of the obligations that they were taking on. I realise that this is a difficult concept for Opposition Front Benchers, but it is important that we all, when we take on a financial commitment, know how to pay for it.

**Huw Merriman** (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): I declare an interest as the chairman of the all-party group on the BBC. A consultation was launched, to which 190,000 people responded, and the pension credit option, which the BBC has selected, was the preferred option. However, although we talk about the BBC having options and choices, we did not provide almost £750 million-worth of funding in the intervening years for it to make that choice. I also say, perhaps to all Members of the House: what is so fair about allowing millionaire over 75-year-olds to have a free TV licence when they may have Sky TV, yet those in their 20s are struggling to buy their own homes?

**Jeremy Wright:** My hon. Friend’s points have been made elsewhere, both within the Houses of Parliament and beyond them. It is right to expect the BBC to consider carefully the responsibility that it has inherited. I have said before that I welcome the fact that the BBC conducted a full consultation, and the scale of the response shows that people took the consultation process seriously. It has considered the consultation responses and has come to a conclusion. I am disappointed at the conclusion that it has reached, but I accept that as a result of the statutory changes we made, it is the BBC’s decision, not the Government’s.

**Tracy Brabin** (Batley and Spen) (Lab/Co-op): Twenty years ago, I played a character in “Coronation Street” called Tricia Armstrong, who was imprisoned for not paying for her TV licence. That caused quite a furore and, in fact, was mentioned in this place at the time. I know that people do not go directly to prison any more for not paying for it, but of the 6,000 constituents of mine who will be affected by this change, I know that there are many who are so proud that they will never claim a benefit such as pension credit and will never claim support for their TV licence. What is the Minister going to do for those who will not claim, who do not want to be criminalised and are therefore prepared to let their TV licence go? Will the Minister with responsibility for loneliness—the Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, the hon. Member for Eastleigh (Mims Davies)—be doing an audit on this?

**Jeremy Wright:** Of course, we want to make sure, in conjunction with the BBC, that everything that can be done to make sure that people do not find themselves in that position is done. The BBC has ways to contact people that are not available even to the Government. It is important that it makes use of every device that it can think of to get the message across that if people need this support and are eligible to claim pension credit, they are entitled to a free TV licence. It is important that we all help to get that message cross.

**Sir Peter Bottomley** (Worthing West) (Con): I do not have an over-75s TV licence because I do not qualify for one, but I will.

My view, as an officer of the all-party group on the BBC and as someone who has been watching the consultation, is that the BBC was required to make a proposal and it is doing so. This is not a still photograph; it is a moving picture. We should be asking in Parliament and in the Government, because there is a great range of views: what do we want to happen?

My view is that we should raise the 75 age threshold by one year every two years, because of longevity, and we ought to add the value of the concession, together with the free bus pass, to the tax allowance for the over-75s, so that those of us who are earning well or have a good pension are contributing, without having them taken away. That would be simple and easy.

**Mr Speaker:** Enjoy the next 49 days—plus the year, of course.

**Jeremy Wright:** My hon. Friend makes an interesting suggestion. He will know that one of the options that the BBC considered and consulted on was raising the threshold from 75 to 80. I appreciate that he is suggesting a rather more subtle variant of that. I want to continue the conversation with the BBC about what else it might be able to do, but I recognise that this specific decision is the BBC’s to make and that it will make that in the form that it thinks is most appropriate.
Mr William Wragg (Hazel Grove) (Con): The 2017 Conservative manifesto contained a number of interesting ideas, some of which has been more convenient to forget from time to time. In this instance, it was quite categorical, so will my right hon. and learned Friend in some way, shape or form ensure that the over-75s maintain their free TV licences for the duration of this Parliament?

Jeremy Wright: As I have made clear, this decision is not for the Government to make any longer; it is for the BBC. We made clear our expectations before the decision was taken; I have made my views to the BBC clear since the decision was made; and I shall continue to make arguments to the BBC about what more can be done.

Janet Daby (Lewisham East) (Lab): In Lewisham East, 3,410 pensioners will lose access to free TV licences, which will perpetuate feelings of loneliness and isolation. The Government are clearly refusing to accept responsibility—indeed, they are dodging responsibility—for breaking a promise made in their 2017 manifesto. Does that mean the Tory Government cannot be trusted?

Jeremy Wright: No, of course not. More to the point, if the hon. Lady is concerned about loneliness—I accept in good faith that she is—I hope she recognises that the Government have taken material action on loneliness more than any Government before. We take these matters so seriously that, as I have said before, we are prepared to put our money where our mouth is on loneliness—and we have done so.

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Con): Does my right hon. and learned Friend agree that instead of forcing the over-75s to pay the compulsory TV tax, with the threat of criminal prosecution, the BBC, which consistently tells me that it is the best in the world, should move to a subscription model and sell its services to those who wish to buy them all across the world? The current system is completely unfair, because every time it is heads the BBC wins, tails the taxpayer loses again.

Jeremy Wright: As my hon. Friend knows, the question of replacing the licence fee with a subscription model or any other model was considered relatively recently and the licence fee model was considered still to be the best one to pursue. I do not believe this is the right time to review that question.

Julie Cooper (Burnley) (Lab): It is not the BBC's responsibility to guarantee free TV licences for the over-75s any more than it is the energy companies’ responsibility to provide the winter fuel payment. The Conservatives' manifesto was very clear: they committed—indeed, they are dodging responsibility—for breaking a promise made in their 2017 manifesto. What message would the Secretary of State say ever again?

Jeremy Wright: I am afraid the hon. Lady is wrong. It is not for the Government to say ever again.
Royal Assent before the 2017 general election. She is simply wrong to say that it is the Government’s responsibility. It is not; it is the BBC’s decision to make.

Maggie Throup (Erewash) (Con): I add my name to the list of MPs bitterly disappointed at the BBC’s reneging on its 2015 deal. I hope BBC bosses are listening to the debate and will listen to my constituents and everyone else’s, because they depend on other people paying their licence fees. If the BBC does not feel that it has a moral obligation to uphold that deal, will my right hon. and learned Friend talk to the BBC, will he make the point made by the hon. Member for Batley and Spen (Tracy Brabin), the pride of many over-75s, which as has already been mentioned is at the dismal level of 60%, to ensure that they can claim, and do so. We, with the BBC, will certainly give thought to the hon. Gentleman’s suggestion about how that can be best communicated.

Jeremy Wright: As I have said, the Government’s view as to what we expected of the BBC was clear. It was expressed clearly a number of times, including by me and indeed by the Prime Minister. However, the statutory fact of the matter is that this is a decision for the BBC to take. We made our view very clear, and other hon. Members made their views clear too, but it remains the BBC’s decision to take. I regret that it took the decision it did, and we must now speak to it about what more can be done.

John Howell (Henley) (Con): Lord Hall is quoted today as saying that many feel that “the Government should continue to foot the Bill.” Does the Secretary of State have an idea of what caused the change of thinking in the BBC? Would he like to say a little more about what he expects the BBC to do to support older people?

Jeremy Wright: I do not know what caused the change of view. There has been a gradual process—a transition—during which public subsidy has diminished and the BBC’s responsibility for covering the cost has increased, so this is not an immediate, overnight change. The BBC has covered such costs in larger and larger amounts for two years. It is up to the BBC to determine what more it feels it can do to support those most vulnerable pensioners.

For those asking what more can we do, I think I have made it clear. The Government have already done a huge amount for pensioners. We have made substantial inputs into ensuring that the poorest pensioners in our society are properly supported. The BBC needs to talk about and think about what more it can do. That is exactly the conversation I intend to have.

Ben Lake (Ceredigion) (PC): I agree with colleagues who have expressed opposition to the decision. Unfortunately, it is an inevitable consequence of the Government effectively outsourcing austerity by transferring responsibility for the over-75s concession to the BBC. If the Government will not right that wrong today, will the Secretary of State at least outline how he intends to increase the take-up rate of pension credit, which as has already been mentioned is at the dismal level of 60%, to ensure that those entitled to it do not lose out twice?

Jeremy Wright: Yes, and I hope that as a result of this debate about the licence fee concession many people who are entitled to pension credit but are not claiming it may have their attention drawn to that fact, recognise that they can claim, and do so. We, with the BBC, will certainly give thought to the hon. Gentleman’s suggestion about how that can be best communicated.

Dr Caroline Johnson (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): The television is a window into the world for lonely elderly people, and may be their only companion. When my right hon. and learned Friend talks to the BBC, will he make the point, which I do not believe it understands, about the pride of this generation and their aversion to being part of a benefits culture?

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): More than 4,000 of my constituents will lose their free TV licences. Will the Secretary of State explain to them simply and clearly how he expected to keep the promise made to them in the 2017 manifesto about their free TV licences? What mechanism did he intend to use?
That is not a lot of money. Those who just miss out on pension credit will struggle to find the money for the TV licence. Will my right hon. and learned Friend do all that he can to persuade the BBC to reverse its decision?

Jeremy Wright: I share my hon. Friend’s disappointment, for the reasons that she has given, and the answer to her second question is yes.

Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): It is clear from the Secretary of State’s answer to the question from my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts) that the Government made a promise in their manifesto, but knew at the time that it was not theirs to make. The Secretary of State has said that he is disappointed with the BBC. Will he clarify whether, during those discussions with the BBC, it ever promised the Government that for the foregoing period of that settlement it would retain free TV licences for all pensioners?

Jeremy Wright: I was not present at those discussions, but it is very clear, is it not, that if someone wants to know roughly how much the financial obligation they are taking on will be, there are ways in which to establish that. One would assume that the BBC carried out exactly that exercise, and therefore knew what it was taking on when it made the agreement; hence the disappointment that I have expressed today.

Eddie Hughes (Walsall North) (Con): It appears to me that the elderly, vulnerable people of Willenhall, Bloxwich and Walsall North are being asked to contribute to the £1.75 million salary of Gary Lineker, which does not seem particularly fair. Does the Secretary of State agree?

Jeremy Wright: My hon. Friend has heard me say that I think one of the things that the BBC must always have an eye on is the need to control salary levels, which, as he says, the people who are licence fee payers expect to be within sensible bounds. I know he will recognise that one of the reasons we know these things is the transparency that the Government have brought about, and that is a good thing, but I think he has made an interesting and fair point.

Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab): I can tell the Secretary of State that Gary Lineker is a lot more popular than the Tories.

We have been here before. The Government hiked up council tax to offset Tory cuts in council services. They introduced a care tax to offset Tory cuts in social care. They introduced a policing tax to offset cuts in policing. Now every single pensioner in the country will know that the Tories made a promise in their manifesto which they could not keep and never intended to keep. When it comes to the next election, those pensioners will remember that, and will remember that they are paying more under the Tories, because of the Tories, for worse services cut by the Tories.

Jeremy Wright: I think that the hon. Gentleman has slightly overstated his case, but if he is concerned about the value of promises, let me say to him that I am still waiting to hear from any Labour Member how exactly Labour intends to fund the promise that it appears to be making to put matters back to the way they were. If they believe that promises are important, they ought to be able to explain how they intend to pay for theirs.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): It was fairly obvious that the BBC would seek to minimise the loss of revenue as a result of this decision. We know that we have a severe underspend on pension credit, and we also know from the database how many over-75s live alone or live together as a couple. Clearly that promise should be kept, and those people should receive free TV licences. I have less sympathy when it comes to large families with wage earners who could pay for the licence. Will my right hon. and learned Friend use this as a means of discussing with the BBC what it should do to honour the commitment that it made?

Jeremy Wright: Yes. As I have said, I will continue to have those conversations. As my hon. Friend will recognise, there were other ways in which the BBC could have approached this issue—even if it took the view that the full concession should not be maintained—and it consulted on some of them. We will, of course, discuss these matters further with the BBC.

Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): The Secretary of State may not accept the moral case for keeping the pledge in his manifesto, but there is a good, cold, hard economic case for resolving this too. He said earlier that pensioners would not go to prison, but we know that people go to prison for not being able to pay the fine for not holding a licence. Does he accept that the cost to the public purse of the prosecutions and the potential incarceration of pensioners, and indeed the consequences of pensioner poverty, far outweigh any benefit from this? Just like the bedroom tax, this is a false economy. Rather than avoiding responsibility for it, the Secretary of State should act on behalf of public taxpayers and get it sorted.

Jeremy Wright: As I said earlier, it is important to be accurate about what may or may not happen. The scenario that the hon. Lady has set out is not one that any of us wants to unfold, and one of the conversations that must now take place with the BBC is about ensuring that we do everything possible to avoid it.

Nigel Huddleston (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): I am a huge supporter of the BBC and normally support the director-general, Tony Hall. Can the Secretary of State confirm that Tony Hall was in the room when the negotiations took place, that he accepted the terms, and that he called the deal a good financial settlement? Perhaps, however, we could help the BBC to fill the gap by enabling and encouraging it to exploit its valuable library further, for instance through streaming and other commercial opportunities.

Jeremy Wright: I am grateful to my hon. Friend. He knows that that is exactly the sort of option that the BBC is considering, as indeed it should. He is also right to say that Tony Hall was fully engaged in those negotiations. I know he will understand that it is important that I continue to discuss with the BBC not just the matters that he has raised but other matters too, and I shall do so.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): The BBC was very happy to grab a contract that gave it an increase in the licence fee when it was offered that contract by the
Government, in the full understanding that it would have to cover for the over-75s. However, it continues to squander money. For example, 150 people there are paid more than the Prime Minister. The News gathering agency pays far more than commercial enterprises. When will the Secretary of State hold the BBC to account by saying, “Either you honour this contract, or we take the money back from you and make the free TV licences available ourselves”?}

Jeremy Wright: As the right hon. Gentleman knows, the position is resolved in statute, and unless we choose to change that statutory position, this remains a BBC decision. As I have said, however, I do not think that it is the end of the story. I think that the BBC can do more than it is currently proposing to do, and I intend to continue to put pressure on it in that regard.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): This day was inevitably going to come, given the policy concerned. When the Secretary of State responds by saying that this is a BBC decision, he is in fact saying that the BBC, an outside organisation, has a veto over the Conservative Government’s delivery on their manifesto commitment. May I join my hon. Friend the Member for Hazel Grove (Mr Wragg) in inviting my right hon. and learned Friend to confirm that he will ensure that the Government fulfil that manifesto commitment?

Jeremy Wright: My hon. Friend will recognise that the delivery of many manifesto commitments requires the co-operation and assistance of others, and this is one of them. We made clear our expectations, and I hope that we have made clear our disappointment. What we must do now is engage further with the BBC about what further action it can and should take.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): I have listened carefully to what the Secretary of State has said, and I am getting a bit sick and tired of the weasel words that he is using. It was quite clear to the 9,000 over-75s in Hull who are to lose their free TV licences that it was a manifesto promise made by the Conservatives in 2017 that they would not lose those licences. As the hon. Member for Cleethorpes (Martin Vickers) has just said, surely a manifesto promise is the responsibility of the Government, and the Government should ensure that it is implemented.

Jeremy Wright: I think that the responsibility of the Government is to continue to discuss with the BBC how this can best be done. This is a BBC responsibility, and those are not weasel words. It is a matter of fact. It is what the statute says, and we must therefore work within the bounds of what that statute tells us. But within those boundaries I believe the BBC can do more even if we accept, as I believe we have to, that this is a BBC decision from the outset. Now that it has made this call, we need to talk to it about what more it can do to address the concerns of the older people that I know the hon. Lady and others are concerned about.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): Is the truth of the matter not that both the BBC and Her Majesty’s Government are at fault over this issue? On one hand my constituents in Kettering are outraged that, having accepted the financial settlement in 2015 and an increase in the licence fee for all the rest of us, the BBC should effectively renge on that commitment by targeting the over-75s at a time when it spends zillions of pounds on overpaid presenters and other so-called stars. At the same time, both my right hon. and learned Friend and I were elected on the Conservative manifesto, which promised pensioners that they would retain their free TV licences. We have already broken one huge manifesto commitment to leave the EU on 29 March, and I suggest we do not add to that list.

Jeremy Wright: I am sure, Mr Speaker, that you will not want me to engage in that particular manifesto commitment, but let me deal with the other one. It is important, as I have said, that the BBC, which does have this responsibility, takes it seriously and makes the best judgment it can, but also that once the BBC has made that judgment we talk to it about what other things can be done in pursuit of the assistance that we all agree needs to be delivered to the most vulnerable older people in our society.

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): This measure means that 5,100 of my constituents will lose out—a whopping 72% of those who currently qualify—and for the record I am appalled at the blatant attacks I have heard today on the very principle of universalism. Is the Secretary of State comfortable—a yes or no answer will do—with people in their 80s and 90s facing prosecution for not having a TV licence while Tory leadership contenders line up to compete about who can implement the biggest tax cuts?

Jeremy Wright: I am not here to speak for any leadership contender; I am here to speak for the Government, and the Government have the responsibility to make sure the BBC carries out its particular obligations under the Digital Economy Act 2017, but that we have the opportunity thereafter to talk about what more can be done, and that is exactly what we are going to do.

Judith Cummins (Bradford South) (Lab): Nearly 3,500 households in my constituency are now set to lose their free TV licences next year despite a Conservative manifesto promise that they would be kept. This is an outrage. So will the Government apologise, do the right thing, and commit today to funding these TV licences at the very least until the end of the next Parliament?

Jeremy Wright: I hope I have made it clear that I think the right thing to do is accept what the law requires as things stand but to work with the BBC to make sure that those in greatest need are properly looked after, and that is exactly what we intend to do.

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): The 1,440 of my constituents who are affected are not going to be impressed by the Government’s shamefaced turnaround on this issue after having committing to upholding the free licence fee. The Secretary of State might say that the Government are not responsible for this, but they are responsible for the increase in pensioner poverty, loneliness and isolation that will ensue, so what are the Government going to do to mitigate those inevitable impacts and guarantee that those deterrents are reversed?
Jeremy Wright: I gave the House the statistics some moments ago: the position is radically improved since 2010 for pensioners who rely on a state pension. That is what this Government have done to make sure that pensioner poverty is tackled. We have done more than Labour ever did, and I will take no lectures from the hon. Gentleman about what it is to look after pensioners; it was not our Government who came up with a 75p increase in the pension. So we will do what is necessary to look after the welfare of the poorest pensioners, but the position on the licence fee is as I have set it out.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): The Secretary of State shifts the blame on to the BBC, shifts the pain on to 3,300 of my constituents, and stands there in shame for breaking this promise to the British people. He is in government; he can change the law, take this back into the Department and make this promise good. Will he do that?

Jeremy Wright: This is the BBC’s responsibility. It is not shifting the blame to say so; it is pretty much quoting word for word what the Digital Economy Act 2017 says. What we should now do is seek to address what else the BBC can do in this space, and that is what we are going to do.

Stephen Morgan (Portsmouth South) (Lab): I have written to Portsmouth pensioners to understand the impact the change to the TV licence scheme would have on their lives, and as one 95-year-old constituent told me:

“I lost my wife in January and now I spend a lot of time alone. Having the TV on is like having someone with me, I do not know what I would do without it.”

How would the Secretary of State advise me to respond to that pensioner?

Jeremy Wright: It would of course depend on that gentleman’s circumstances, but I hope the hon. Gentleman will be prepared to assist us and the BBC in making sure the right information is given to older people who may be concerned that they are about to lose their TV licence when in fact they are not, because some will retain it. It is important that we get across clearly to those who will otherwise worry that they are or could be in receipt of pension credit, they will not lose that benefit. So it is important that we all take the chance to communicate with our constituents in a way that is accurate and that reassures where we can.

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): This is a Government who raised the pension age and who only last month changed the pension credit criteria, making it more difficult for couples to qualify for pension credit—something the Secretary of State has not mentioned. Those couples could very well be among those who do not now qualify for the TV licence. But does the Secretary of State agree with the principle that this Parliament has a right to reverse the decision of a previous Parliament, and that there should now be a debate and a vote on who is responsible for the TV licence and who is eligible for free licences?

Jeremy Wright: Of course the hon. Gentleman is right that Parliaments cannot bind their successors, and if the Government bring legislation forward Parliament will have to consider it. On the question of whether or not Parliament has opportunities to consider this matter, it is having one now, it has had them in the past and I have no doubt that you will be prepared to entertain all applications if they are made, Mr Speaker.

Mohammad Yasin (Bedford) (Lab): Most of those set to lose the TV licence will not qualify for pension credit but still struggle to make ends meet, including 4,470 from Bedford and Kempston. Does the Secretary of State agree that his party has broken another manifesto pledge and cut a lifeline to the outside world for many older people, who suffer most from loneliness and social isolation?

Jeremy Wright: No.

Gerald Jones (Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney) (Lab): Some 3,220 people in my constituency currently benefit from this policy. No matter which way the Secretary of State tries to dress it up, to transfer the responsibility to the BBC without the corresponding budget and then have Tory MPs line up, as they have done over the last few days, and criticise the BBC is just plain wrong, not to mention shameful. So will the Secretary of State review this situation, yes or no?

Jeremy Wright: I think I have been clear about what I intend to do next. I am not seeking to dress anything up; I am expressing to the House what the current situation is, and the situation is that the BBC has the responsibility to decide what to do with the TV licence concession we have been discussing, and it has decided. I have expressed my disappointment with what it has decided and intend to take the matter further in discussions with it.

Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby) (Lab): Nearly 4,000 of my constituents are going to be affected by this decision. I find it absolutely shocking that the Secretary of State, who stood on a 2017 manifesto that promised over-75s that they would keep this benefit—hard-working over-75s who have lived by the rules all their lives and contributed in every way to get this tiny benefit—now says they cannot do so. Does he not think he owes those people more of an explanation than he is giving this House today?

Jeremy Wright: I think I am up to about an hour and 10 minutes’-worth of explanation so far, and I think it is important, as I have said, that we communicate what is happening to older people who will be concerned. It is important to do that with accuracy and to be straightforward about who will be able to retain this benefit, and it is important for the Government to continue to communicate with the BBC. As I hope I have made clear, I intend to do so.

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): I always believe that there are three sides to the truth. There is the truth of the BBC, which I have much sympathy with; the Government’s truth of not fulfilling a manifesto commitment; and the truth of the 7,066 pensioners over 75 in my own constituency. There is also the truth of Josephine, who phoned GMTV yesterday morning to say that:

“it means an awful lot to me, because that would be £25 a month coming out of our joint pension. We’re self-funding in a residential care home”—

luckily, that will not happen in Scotland—
“and he gets no pension credit. They’ve taken all his attendance allowance when he went in, so what happens to people like us?”

Would the Minister like to tell Josephine what happens?

Jeremy Wright: As I have said, it is important that we continue to discuss with the BBC what more can be done for people like that. It is important, as I have said, to be clear about who will continue to get this benefit, and it is important to have this continuing conversation with the BBC about what more can be done for those people, but I will not accept that this Government have not done anything to support people who are in difficulty. Quite the reverse: this Government have done a huge amount to do that, and it is important that when we communicate these things, they are communicated in the round.

David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): Knowing that this decision was coming down the line, knowing that the BBC may have made the choice that it has made and knowing that this was a manifesto commitment of his Government, has the Secretary of State personally had any discussions with the Treasury in his 11 months in office, to ensure that the 3,800 pensioners in the Delyn constituency who will lose their benefit and now pay over £500,000 more—money lost from our local economy—can get justice and see the Conservative party meeting its manifesto commitment?

Jeremy Wright: The answer to the right hon. Gentleman’s question is that I discovered the BBC’s plans on Sunday, before the announcement on Monday. I have not had a discussion with Treasury Ministers since that time but, as I said, I intend to have a number of discussions about what further action can be taken, predominantly by the BBC, but of course the Government will continue to look at what they can do across the whole range of benefits policy, as they always do.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): It is predicted that this change in plans will cost the BBC £250 million by 2021-22. That is money that is not going into jobs in Pacific Quay, in my constituency. Can the Secretary of State stand here and guarantee that no jobs will be lost in Pacific Quay as a result of this sleekit Tory sleight of hand?

Jeremy Wright: What I can say to the hon. Lady is that when the BBC decided to take on this responsibility, one would have thought that the bare minimum of what it expected to have to outlay would have been what it is currently intending to outlay, so it should have made any calculation about how affordable that might be in 2015—and I am sure it did. She and I will both continue to expect the BBC to provide a good service, employing excellent people in her constituency and elsewhere to offer the best possible television product to the nation.

Nic Dakin (Scunthorpe) (Lab): About 4,400 pensioners in the Scunthorpe area will lose their free TV licences based on this announcement today. Is the Secretary of State saying that the Government are happy to break the election promise that those people voted on in 2017?

Jeremy Wright: I do not think it is possible to say I am happy. I think my disappointment has been made very clear, but it is, I am afraid, now for the Government to work with the BBC to see what more can be done. I hope that if the hon. Gentleman’s party continues to say that this responsibility should be taken back by the taxpayer, we will at some stage get a little detail about how that might be paid for.

Hugh Gaffney (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (Lab): Three thousand households in my constituency will lose their TV licence, yet the Tory leadership candidates are focused on cutting taxes for the wealthy and have nothing to say about this vital support being taken away from the elderly. Is this not another broken promise from a Tory Government who always choose to protect the few at the expense of the many? Will the Minister tell me which Tory leadership candidate he would support to find the money?

Jeremy Wright: I think the hon. Gentleman is wrong, and if he was here earlier, he would have heard others quoting what the Conservative party leadership candidates have said specifically on this subject. As I said earlier, I do not answer for any of them; I answer for the Government.

Mr Speaker: I do not know what the hon. Member for Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill (Hugh Gaffney) did or did not pick up, but he has certainly been here throughout these exchanges.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): I have 4,200 elderly constituents who will lose out because of this. Any of them who are watching the answers from the Dispatch Box today will be reminded, as I am, of a line from a Billy Connolly joke, which is that “a big boy did it and ran away”. That seems to be the Government’s response. The Secretary of State asked how the £500 million could come from the taxpayer, but he is one of those who voted for inheritance tax cuts, corporation tax cuts and cuts to income tax thresholds for the richest. I have figures from the House of Commons Library showing that those measures will cost £80 billion by the year 2025. I will send him those figures as a starter for where the money can be found.

Jeremy Wright: If the hon. Gentleman is waiting for me to apologise for my advocacy for low taxes, he will wait a long time. I believe in low taxes, and it is important that we are a low tax economy, but I also believe it is important to offer the maximum support to those who need it most, and that is exactly what this Government have done. There has been no evasion on the position from me. I have made it quite clear to the House that the position is, and the arguments that have been deployed today are the same arguments that were deployed in 2017 and the same comments that were made in 2015. We have all known what the position was in terms of the BBC’s responsibility for at least two years, and arguably for four.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Does the Secretary of State not agree that the BBC saying it is not in charge of welfare benefits does not take away from the fact that it has a duty of care to the public, and that its petty statement of shifting blame does not help those who are sitting alone at home? Does the Secretary of State agree that this could well be the straw that breaks the camel’s back in terms of people determining not to use the BBC and to withdraw their fee?
Jeremy Wright: I agree with the hon. Gentleman that the BBC has a responsibility here, and to be fair to the BBC, most of the people I speak to at the BBC accept that. However, I do not find the conclusion they have reached so far to be satisfactory, which is why I will continue to speak to them about what more can be done. I very much hope that his conclusion is wrong and that people do not move away from the BBC to other providers. I believe the BBC has a good deal to offer, not just to the world of broadcasting but to our society more broadly. However, it is important, as he says, that it takes its broader responsibilities very seriously.

BILL PRESENTED

Climate Change (Emissions Targets) Bill
Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Rachel Reeves, supported by Mary Creagh, Edward Miliband, Drew Hendry, Norman Lamb, Caroline Lucas, Nicky Morgan, Peter Kyle, Zac Goldsmith, Anna McMorrin, Antoinette Sandbach and Dr Sarah Wollaston, presented a Bill to amend the Climate Change Act 2008 to require net United Kingdom carbon emissions to be zero by 2050 and to include international aviation and international shipping in the calculation of such emissions.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time tomorrow, and to be printed (Bill 399).

United Kingdom Atomic Energy Authority Pension Transfers (Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman Investigation)

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

1.57 pm

Mr Edward Vaizey (Wantage) (Con): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to make provision to enable a Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman to investigate advice given by the Secretary of State and the Government Actuary relating to transfers of pensions from the United Kingdom Atomic Energy Authority pension scheme to the AEA Technology pension scheme; and for connected purposes.

This is the main event of the parliamentary day. I welcome many of the people who have supported this Bill. Many of those in the Chamber today, from all parties, have played a crucial role in trying to get justice for the AEA Technology pensioners. I would like to begin by briefly recapping the case of those pensioners.

In 1996, the then Conservative Government privatised the commercial arm of the UK Atomic Energy Authority, then based at Harwell in my constituency, and it became AEA Technology plc. As part of the privatisation, most of the staff who were transferred to AEA were persuaded to transfer their past pension service, accrued under the Government’s scheme under the UK AEA pension schemes, into the new defined benefit AEA Technology pension scheme, a private pension scheme. You can guess what happened next, Madam Deputy Speaker. Although it did not happen immediately, some 25 years later, AEA Technology went into pre-pack administration and disposed of its pension liabilities. The pension scheme went into the Pension Protection Fund in July 2016, meaning that pensions accrued before 6 April 1997 are frozen.

AEA Technology pensioners among my constituents, and those of many other Members, maintain that they were influenced by incomplete, misleading advice provided by UK AEA and the Government Actuary’s Department. They have therefore rightly been fighting a campaign to right that wrong by reinstating the pension rights that were promised to them at the time of privatisation. Over 3,000 pensioners were affected by that advice and some of them are here today. The hon. Member for Oxford West and Abingdon (Layla Moran), who is not here, and I continue to represent the bulk of the pensioners, but they now reside all across the country, which is why several of my hon. Friends are present.

Some pensioners have lost about 10% of their pension, but the cumulative impact for many will be that their pensions decline by between 30% and 50% over time. That is a clear injustice. It is clear that my constituents and their fellow pensioners were misled 20 years ago in the advice on whether to retain their accrued benefits in what was effectively a Government pension scheme, or to transfer them to a private scheme. The advice given to them in 1996 was that the private sector scheme would be no less favourable than the public sector scheme.

As the advice from the Government Actuary’s Department was written down, we are able to review it today. It issued a paper that discussed transfers from the superannuation scheme—the Government scheme—to the private scheme. In section 3 of that paper, the Government Actuary’s Department listed what it describes
on the contents page as the “Advantages of preserving”, which means the advantages of staying in the old Government scheme. Another section describes the “advantages of taking a special transfer value”, meaning the advantages of moving to the private scheme.

The first strange thing about that is that section 3, in which the Government Actuary’s Department lists the “Factors to consider in making the decision”, in particular describing the advantages of preserving the scheme benefits and looking at what might influence the employees to remain in the public sector scheme, states that

“it is unlikely that the benefit promise made by either the UKAEA Scheme or the AEAT Scheme would ever be broken”. It went on to say that it is even more unlikely that both promises would be broken.

My constituent, Derek Whitmell, has been assiduous in digging out information from various organs of Government. He has a letter from the Government Actuary’s Department, dated 14 November 2014, which states:

“We have found no specific record on file of the underlying justification”,

for the statement I just quoted about broken promises. Pensioners were told that a transfer would not be detrimental to them and that it was unlikely that being in the private sector scheme would have any impact on them. However, the then Pensions Minister, Steve Webb, put forward many hypotheses when responding to a debate in 2015, including the possibility that the company could go into insolvency. I am not saying the Government should be responsible for the investment decisions of AEA Technology, but it is clear that the risks were hidden from pensioners at the time.

Thanks to other FOI requests from my constituent, we have been able to examine how the advice was originally drafted. One astonishing paragraph from AEA Technology states:

“We believe the general tone of this note is likely to discourage people from transferring to the AEAT scheme” — the private scheme —

“while recognising that the note must be as neutral as possible we do not think this is the case and have suggested a few places where the tone could be modified.”

In plain English, to me that means, “Slant the advice to encourage people to transfer.” It is therefore hardly surprising that 90% of pensioners transferred to that scheme. I remind the House that these people were highly trained research scientists and physicists—not only the kind of people that one would expect to read the small print, but those who would trust authoritative Government advice.

The pensioners have long been pushed from pillar to post. I went to the then Secretary of State for Work and Pensions and the Pensions Minister before the 2015 election. I went to the then Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills and was told to go to the ombudsman. A full complaint was made to the ombudsman, who decided not to take any action, and part of the reason for that is because they are not able to review the advice of the Government Actuary’s Department. At the heart of all this is a plain and simple fact: my constituents and others were misled in the advice that they were given, but they have no means of legal redress under the current ombudsman arrangements. I am therefore extremely grateful to my colleagues who have worked hard to try to address the injustice, in particular my hon. Friend the Member for Mole Valley (Sir Paul Beresford) and my right hon. Friend the Member for West Dorset (Sir Oliver Letwin) for their help in drafting the Bill.

The Bill is designed to right a wrong that has been dogging these pensioners for years. Indeed, this issue has been dragging on for so long that we have been debating it for some five or six years. Speaking on the pensioners’ behalf, Tony Reading, chair of the AEAT Pension Campaign, said:

“We were mis-sold a risky pension scheme. Since 2012 we have been seeking restoration of the inflation proofing of our pensions, for which we paid 30% higher contributions. Our previous employer, and the DWP, BEIS, and the Pensions Ombudsman refused to consider our complaint. We were referred to the PHSO who said they could not consider our complaint because the law did not permit it. We hope to get the law changed and our complaint properly investigated. We just want the pension that we paid for, in good faith, for all of our working lives. We hope that MPs will support this Bill.”

Those thoughts were echoed by the union Prospect, which continues to represent a number of the pensioners:

“Our members in AEAT were clearly misled over the decision to transfer their accrued pension benefits and we have fought a long campaign for justice. This Bill is an important step towards righting this wrong, and we hope that it finds support from MPs and from the Government.”

The pensioners, their union and I thank hon. Members for their support and I hope that the Bill will continue to receive support should it receive a Second Reading.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered.

That Mr Edward Vaizey, Richard Benyon, Sir Paul Beresford, Robert Courts, Stephen Crabb, Anneliese Dodds, John Howell, Sir Oliver Letwin, Layla Moran, Victoria Prentis, Dr Sarah Wollaston and Mohammad Yasin present the Bill.

Mr Edward Vaizey accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time tomorrow, and to be printed (Bill 400).
Consumer Protection

2.8 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Kelly Tolhurst): I beg to move,

That the draft Consumer Rights Act 2015 (Enforcement) (Amendment) Order 2019, which was laid before this House on 13 May, be approved.

Ensuring the safety of UK consumers is a key priority for the Government. It is vital that consumers can trust that the products they buy are safe. Responsible and law-abiding businesses also need to be confident that businesses which ignore their responsibilities will be held to account for breaches of product safety.

The UK enjoys a robust legal framework to protect consumers, and the Government are committed to maintaining and building on that. Indeed, we have taken decisive action to enhance the effective functioning of the product safety system. We launched the Office for Product Safety and Standards last year to enhance the UK’s product safety system and to provide strategic leadership and co-ordination of the system, taking a lead in response to national product safety incidents. The OPSS works closely with local trading standards teams to support them in tackling local issues.

Yvonne Fovargue (Makerfield) (Lab): Does not the Minister agree that the cuts to local trading standards departments, which have seen them lose about 56% of their staff, have severely hampered their work in keeping the public safe?

Kelly Tolhurst: The hon. Lady is right about the role of trading standards and the pressures under which departments operate. The local priorities of local trading standards will always differ across the country. The beauty of the OPSS is that it takes a strategic role, which enables it to support local and national trading standards in dealing with nationwide issues. It also provides expertise and financial support for testing functions, when required.

We launched the OPSS last year to enhance the system. We work closely with local trading standards departments to support them in their work and in tackling local issues. The aim of this order is to strengthen the ability of the OPSS to carry out its role in leading the response to national product safety incidents and cases and in ensuring the cohesion of the product safety system.

The order does three things. First, it will enable the Secretary of State, and the OPSS on his behalf, to investigate potential safety issues related to consumer products regulated by the provisions of the General Product Safety Regulations 2005, using the investigatory powers listed in schedule 5 to the Consumer Rights Act 2015. Secondly, the order will enable enforcement authorities in the UK, including local trading standards, district councils in Northern Ireland and the Secretary of State, to use those same investigatory powers to investigate claims about gas appliances and personal protective equipment. Finally, the order makes a minor amendment to the Measuring Instruments Regulations 2016 and to the related reference in paragraph 10 of schedule 5 to the 2015 Act to correct a typographical error.

Potential safety issues relating to consumer products covered solely by the General Product Safety Regulations can already be investigated by enforcement authorities using the powers under schedule 5 to the 2015 Act. Such issues are generally investigated by local trading standards in the UK and by district councils in Northern Ireland in the local area where the incident has occurred. The order will enable the Office for Product Safety and Standards, on behalf of the Secretary of State, to investigate claims of unsafe products in the context of national incidents or cases, providing equivalent investigatory powers to those available to local trading standards and other relevant enforcement authorities. This means that the OPSS can provide the leadership and action needed to deal with national incidents and cases.

The order will provide the full range of powers contained in schedule 5 to the 2015 Act, which includes powers to require the production and potential seizure of documents, the inspection and purchase of products, the testing of equipment and the seizure and retention of goods. These are essential aspects of undertaking effective checks and actions in relation to unsafe goods. It is vital that our new national regulator has these powers across the broad spectrum of consumer products, which will enable it to provide leadership on cases and incidents of national importance.

The Secretary of State, and the Office for Product Safety and Standards on his behalf, may already exercise these powers in relation to the enforcement of sector-specific regulations such as on electrical equipment, lifts and so on. The Government want to ensure that the Secretary of State can lead across the wide range of consumer products, not just those that fall under sector-specific regulations. The order therefore allows the Secretary of State to investigate any type of product covered solely by the General Product Safety Regulations, should the need arise.

The order’s second purpose is to make sure that the Secretary of State, local trading standards in Great Britain and district councils in Northern Ireland can investigate safety issues concerning gas appliances and personal protective equipment. New regulations were introduced last year under the negative procedure, and this order now provides for the amendment of the 2015 Act by the affirmative procedure. It also enables enforcement authorities to use the investigatory powers in schedule 5 to the 2015 Act in relation to products covered by the 2018 regulations.

Finally, the intention underpinning the enforcement of the Measuring Instruments Regulations has always been that the enforcement authorities should have access to the investigatory powers in schedule 5 to the 2015 Act. This order corrects a typographical error in the relevant provision in both the regulations and schedule 5.

The order will provide the ability for the OPSS to lead and co-ordinate responses to national product safety cases and incidents, enhancing protection for UK consumers. It improves the Secretary of State’s ability to investigate claims of unsafe consumer products, and it helps to prevent injury and loss of life.

Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): The Minister probably knows what I am going to say about school notice boards. She and her colleagues have been very helpful.
Could she confirm that the order will make it quicker and easier to look at such products, which at least need investigation?

Kelly Tolhurst: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. I note his passion for the safety of notice boards in schools. He is correct. The essence of the order is that the Office for Product Safety and Standards will be able to act quickly and effectively in investigating and in using the full range of powers open to us to make sure we take the necessary action to protect consumers.

Enhancing protection for UK consumers is at the heart of my Department’s priorities, and the order improves the Secretary of State’s ability to investigate claims about unsafe consumer products and helps to prevent injury and loss of life. The order gives greater protection to law-abiding businesses, as it helps to stop unfair competition by preventing the placing of unsafe products on the UK market, and it makes sure that, where there is a national product safety incident, the Secretary of State can provide the necessary support and leadership to investigate.

The order enables the Secretary of State, local trading standards and district councils to investigate the safety of gas appliances and personal protective equipment regulated by the 2018 regulations. It is a further step in making sure that the Office for Product Safety and Standards can fulfil its regulatory role in the area of product safety, and it is a further step in the Government’s commitment to protecting consumers and maintaining fair markets for law-abiding businesses.

2.17 pm

Gill Furniss (Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough) (Lab): UK consumers spend over £1,160 billion a year on goods and services, and they are the backbone of the British economy. They spend their hard-earned money in shops and, increasingly, online. It is vital they are properly protected when buying products to ensure consumer safety.

The majority of law enforcement—75% of public enforcement responsibilities—is carried out by local authority trading standards services, from scams to products. However, those services have had to deal with cuts of more than 50% over the past seven years, and some parts of the country have been hit particularly hard. These cuts will undoubtedly have a negative impact on their ability properly to inform and enforce consumer protection.

Sadly, lack of compliance with consumer protection law can have serious and deadly consequences. For example, around 3,000 fires each year in the UK are caused by faulty electrical appliances. This technical order “establishes equivalency with respect to the investigatory powers in Schedule 5 to the Act between the Secretary of State and those of local authority Trading Standards and district councils in Northern Ireland”.

The explanatory memorandum goes on to say:

“The instrument allows the Office for Product Safety and Standards, on behalf of the Secretary of State, to investigate claims of unsafe products in the context of a national incident, where local authority Trading Standards...lack the resources or expertise to do so.”

I broadly welcome this statutory instrument, in that it attempts to strengthen the enforcement regime. However, there are some points to note.

According to the National Audit Office, overall, local trading standards have lost 56% of their full-time equivalent staff since 2009, and 20 services in England have had their funding cut by over 60% since 2011. Some services now have only one qualified officer. Despite that lack of funding, local trading standards teams are expected to enforce 263 different pieces of legislation for different Government Departments, with little direction from Government on the priority of those issues. It is this Government who have taken away the vital ability of trading standards to properly enforce consumer protection.

The OPSS was finally established after years of reviews and consultations, but unfortunately it has proved to be weak. It launched an investigation into Whirlpool following reports that more than 100 Creda, Hotpoint, Indesit, Proline and Swan tumble dryer models—all brands owned by Whirlpool—made between April 2004 and October 2015 could pose a fire risk. It is known that at least 750 fires have been reported since 2004 that involved those dryers.

Following its investigation, the OPSS assessed Whirlpool’s tumble dryer modification programme, and judged that the risk to consumers from modified machines is low. Consumer groups led by Which? were incensed by what they called a “fundamentally flawed” investigation “that appears to favour business interests over people’s safety.”

The investigation failed to speak with any affected Whirlpool customers as part of the review, and further failed to verify the history of the 28 Whirlpool dryers it tested as part of the inquiry, so it was unable to draw conclusions about when the machines had been modified and by whom.

How does the Minister suggest we have confidence in the OPSS if its first ever investigation has been so widely criticised for its failure properly to tackle the issues at hand? It is one thing to give it investigatory power, but another for the OPSS sufficiently to use those powers to investigate big business and hold it to account for its handling of such serious issues.

In so far as the use and scope of the investigatory powers is concerned, the note outlines that, “it is envisaged that the investigatory powers will not be used frequently...However, when these occur the Office will be able to support and supplement the work of local authority Trading Standards more effectively than at present”.

Can the Minister outline what criteria will be set and will have to be met for OPSS and the Secretary of State to use these powers? Can she outline the process used to decide whether and when these powers will be used? Can she outline the process that will take—will any investigation undertaken by the OPSS then invalidate a local trading standards investigation? Will the two co-operate or will they be able to undertake any investigations in parallel? Finally, what discussions has the Minister had with trading standards about the use of these powers?

In conclusion, I draw the Minister’s attention to the fact that, yet again, an SI has been prepared without an accompanying impact assessment, and ask why that is.

2.23 pm

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): I welcome the way in which the Minister has put this to the House. I would be interested in the responses to the questions
[Sir Peter Bottomley]

raised by the hon. Member for Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough (Gill Furniss), the Opposition Front-Bench spokesperson.

I have had two serious interests in consumer protection, which may or may not be partially affected by this regulation. The first was in residential leasehold, when Tchenguiz interests—including I am not terribly concerned about which they were—forced large numbers of leaseholders to change their call systems. There were rigged bids for replacing them, and when eventually the authorities began to take account of what was happening, the subsidiary Cirrus, which did nearly all the work, having won nearly all the bids, reported itself, saying that it was involved in a cartel. The others were minnows. The others got punished, and the Tchenguiz interests, through Peverel and Cirrus, got off scot-free.

I would like to know from the Minister, perhaps in writing after this debate, whether that is the kind of thing that could be picked up by these regulations, if reported by, for example, the campaigning charity Leasehold Knowledge Partnership, or whether there is some other way in which the Serious Fraud Office, trading standards and others could come in and protect these people. There are no current legal proceedings, so there is no particular problem, and the Minister may want to get her Department to consult other Departments about what they were doing when they were first alerted to these problems.

Secondly, I advise the Government to try to make sure that all those involved take account of the serious issues that are justified, but do not spend too much time chasing ones that are not. Many years ago, when I was Minister for roads, painting white lines down the middle of our national highways—quite a dangerous position to be in—our Consumers Association, Which?!, followed up something from the Consumer Union in the United States, which wrongly took against a small four-wheel-drive car called the Suzuki Jimny or Samurai or 410; the suggestion was that it was the most dangerous vehicle on the roads, which should be banned. It was clearly not more dangerous than motor cycles. It turned out that it was not even the most dangerous in terms of stability. Nevertheless, for a year I had to fight off those who were arguing for a ban.

The point of telling this story to the Minister is that I hope the Government will take some account of whether they are doing when they were first alerted to these problems.

The need for greater scrutiny of product safety has required much sharper focus since the start of the UK’s preparations for departure from the EU, as Brexit raises a huge question mark over the future of the domestic product safety regime. In addition, there is no denying the uncertainty and costs for businesses as they try to plan ahead. We all share concerns that there could be genuine risks for consumers that the levels of product safety enjoyed as an EU member may well be under threat.

The provisions of the statutory instrument to give greater powers to the Secretary of State, under the auspices of the OPSS, to investigate claims about unsafe consumer products in the context of a national incident, are very important, as are those that would require the OPSS to work more closely with trading standards, offering additional protection to consumers alongside current arrangements.

The aim here, that an effective enforcement regime requires the UK to arrange and ensure that the relevant enforcement agencies have and use the necessary powers to take appropriate measures on product safety, is laudable. However, I would impress upon the Minister that in the wider context of product safety a poor deal or no deal from the EU has the potential to put our product safety system in real jeopardy. I wonder, given the strengthening of the OPSS’s role, what additional funding it will be allocated to fulfil its role properly. Given that it will work more closely with trading standards than at present, will that mean additional funding for trading standards across the UK, given that they are already extremely hard-pressed in the face of evolving and creative threats to consumers and their safety? Can the Minister guarantee that the necessary funding for the OPSS, which will be required to carry out its new responsibilities, will be forthcoming?

What preparation has the OPSS done to ensure that it is indeed ready to assume the increased responsibility? We can all agree that consumer safety matters, but we also know that regulating it and monitoring it must be properly paid for, so I would be interested to hear what responses the Minister has to that.

I end by commending to the Minister the Scottish Government’s new consumer protection Bill, and the new Consumer Scotland body, which will champion consumer rights and protections, which she may wish to examine to see what can be learned from Scotland—as I am sure the Scottish Government will examine with interest the provisions before the House today.

2.29 pm

Mrs Sharon Hodgson (Washington and Sunderland West) (Lab): I am going to speak about something slightly different, which is what I think should be in the statutory instrument. As Members probably know—if they do not, it is probably because I have not banged on about it enough—I chair the all-party group on ticket abuse, in which capacity I wish to speak today. I feel strongly that with this SI the Government have missed a great opportunity to address some concerns that have been expressed to me over the years.

The Consumer Rights Act 2015 refers explicitly to secondary ticketing. Despite that important legislation, fans continue to be ripped off by secondary ticket touts
who sell tickets for huge profits to genuine fans. Some tout
do this regardless of whether the ticket actually exists, and
without any regard for existing legislation. This leaves
people out of pocket, frustrated, disappointed and unable
to attend an event that they have saved for and
looked forward to. The 2015 Act exists to protect
consumers, which is what we are discussing, but it is
failing to do so because of insufficient enforcement.
Without sufficient enforcement, it becomes a moot Act,
if there can be such a thing. That is why I wish to make
the case today for more funding for our enforcement
agencies, as I believe that enforcement is a significant
aspect of the 2015 Act that is missing from this SI. I
hope the Government will consider rectifying that.

National trading standards

delivers national and regional consumer protection enforcement...Its purpose is to protect consumers and safeguard legitimate businesses
by tackling serious national and regional consumer protection issues and organised criminality and by providing a ‘safety net’ to limit unsafe consumer goods entering the UK.

To perform this huge task, the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy provides national trading standards and Trading Standards Scotland with just £14 million. With that small amount of funding, trading standards is expected to protect consumers from scams and cyber-crime and to protect UK borders and public safety. Does the Minister agree that £14 million per year for this huge responsibility, which requires investigation, prevention, safeguarding and enforcement, is really not enough to fulfil the task to an acceptable level, and
that it must—I know it does—leave NTS officers continually frustrated and overworked? Has the Minister made any
assessment of how much funding NTS needs to fulfil its
role to the highest standard?

The 2015 Act makes it clear that sellers must provide
seat, row and block numbers, as well as the unique
ticket ID number, if the event organisers insist on it, yet
there are still examples of secondary ticketing sites that
do not supply this information. Touts are therefore still able to operate illegally and rip off genuine fans without
any serious implications. The legislation exists—we are
talking about it—but despite a long-running Competition
and Markets Authority investigation, enforcement is
still lacking. That means it is up to organisers, venues
and promoters to monitor secondary ticket touts, cancel
tickets when necessary, and respond to disappointed
fans who are denied access with invalid tickets. Such
expectations are unreasonable for organisers, venues
and promoters. At a recent meeting of the all-party
group, an event organiser said:

“We don’t want to be the enforcers, but if agencies aren’t there
then we have to step in.”

Does the Minister agree that this is not an acceptable
expectation for organisers, venues and promoters?

As the House knows, I have been working on this
issue for a long time now, and I am convinced that ticket
touts will continue to operate outside the law until there
is a sustainably funded agency to ensure that the existing
legislation—this legislation—is enforced. That is why
the SI is deficient. Recently, we saw two English teams
disappointing that those fans went through, even though the 2015 Act should have
made it impossible for that to happen. Unfortunately,
this is not a rare occurrence: it is something I hear about
all too often from the excellent campaign groups Victim
of Viagogo and the FanFair Alliance.

If the Government want to protect consumers—which
is what we are here to do—they must invest in our
enforcement agencies to ensure that the existing legislation
is totally adhered to. I know that what I have talked
about is slightly out with the scope of the SI, and I am
so grateful for the House’s indulgence and to you,
Madam Deputy Speaker, for allowing me to talk about
the funding of national trading standards, but I hope
the Minister has heard what I have had to say, even
though I have sneaked it in as I have done, and will look
into the issue as soon as possible.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton):
Before I call the Minister, I should say that I allowed the
hon. Lady some leeway and she has put her views on the
record, but I expect the Minister to address what is in
the statutory instrument, rather than what is not.

2.36 pm

Kelly Tolhurst: I welcome the contributions from all
Members, because we all care about consumer safety
and it definitely lies at the heart of what I have been
doing in my time at the Department. I wish to comment
on some of the points made and answer some of the
questions that were posed.

First, I respect the hon. Member for Sheffield, Brightside
and Hillsborough (Gill Furniss) and her thoughts on
Whirlpool, but I did inform the House in oral questions
this morning—I do not know whether she heard—that
the Government have notified Whirlpool of their intention
to issue a recall notice, which is part of the regulatory
process. Although I have much respect for the hon.
Lady, I totally disagree with her characterisation of the
Government’s view on taking forward the concerns
relating to Whirlpool and of the Office for Product
Safety and Standards’s role in that process.

Yvonne Fovargue: There are still millions of people
who have not contacted Whirlpool and about whom
Whirlpool knows nothing, so does the Minister not
agree that the recall process would have been so much
easier had there been at the time of sale a central register
that could be used only in the event of a recall of
dangerous white goods?

Kelly Tolhurst: The hon lady raises an important
point. The process we have followed has meant that the
Office for Product Safety and Standards carried out a
review. We obviously want to move on to the next stage,
and this is a great example of what the Office for
Product Safety and Standards is able to do. The statutory
instrument describes a specific element of that, mainly
relating to the investigatory powers. We are doing
further work on consumer protection as we bring together
the hope, in the near future—a consumer White Paper on
strengthening enforcement and a host of other things,
on the back of the Green Paper that was announced last
year.
On the Secretary of State’s powers to investigate, local trading standards in Great Britain and district councils investigate claims about potentially unsafe products in their local areas. National incidents are designated under the Office for Product Safety and Standards’ national incident management plan triage process. We want the OPSS to lead on national incidents and to have the same investigatory powers as local trading standards. The Secretary of State already has equivalent investigatory powers to investigate any products regulated under specific legislation, such as cosmetics and electrical equipment, but not cots and DIY tools. This order aligns the Secretary of State’s powers with those that are already available to trading standards and ensures the consistency of the powers that could be used by the OPSS. The circumstances under which the Secretary of State would exercise those powers is where the OPSS’s national incident management plan triage process concludes that the nature of the product warrants such action.

With regard to the OPSS and its communication with our trading standards, I have to tell the House that the relationship between national trading standards, local trading standards and the OPSS is one of continuous communication and working together. We would not be able to influence and to have such a great enforcement system without those organisations working together. Yesterday, I met trading standards professionals across the enforcement landscape. A key part of my role has been making sure that I keep in touch with representatives of national and local trading standards. I wish to put it on record that trading standards officers do invaluable and exceptional work throughout the country. They work incredibly hard and are very much the unsung heroes.

Mrs Hodgson: I agree with the Minister on that point, but I want to highlight the points that I was making about the funding of national trading standards. [Interruption.] She has just assured me that she is coming on to that point.

Kelly Tolhurst: The Government took a great step when they formed the OPSS in January 2018. The OPSS was given additional funding of £12 million a year to build national capacity for product safety. The expertise—the scientific-based research—that it will be able to undertake will aid and assist local trading standards in carrying out their own functions. This is very much a working-together situation. We have committed £190,000 to behavioural insights to date and invested £498,000 on social science research. Over the next three years, £4 million will be spent on upgrading the scientific facilities in Teddington, and £750,000 of support has been provided in 2018-19 for testing and training trading standards, and there is another £500,000 funding for trading standards to carry out product safety testing, and that will increase next year. We have also trained more than 250 trading standards authorities, which included training 800 people. Such training enables local trading standards to have free access to the technical British standards, which really equips them and supports them in identifying compliance issues.

Let me move on now to the issues raised by the hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson). She was very concerned about funding, and as I have tried to outline, the OPSS will take a strategic role in supporting local trading standards. The statutory instrument ensures that we have a clear enforcement strategy, which gives the OPSS and the Secretary of State the powers that they need.

Patricia Gibson: Forgive me if the Minister has said this already and I have missed it, but given that the powers of the OPSS are to be strengthened, will there be an increase in personnel to support trading standards, and will the OPSS itself receive additional money—apart from the £12 million that it received when it was set up?

Kelly Tolhurst: The OPSS is ready. It is taking on not extra work, but an extra power, which it is quite ready to take on. I have already outlined what it has done in the case of Whirlpool.

I understand the concerns of the hon. Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson), and she is a great campaigner in this area. She will know that work is ongoing with regard to secondary ticketing. That matter is not related to this SI, but I am more than happy to speak with her directly outside the Chamber to give her some more assurances if that is what she wants.

I almost forgot the contribution of my hon. Friend the Member for Worthing West (Sir Peter Bottomley). I am grateful to him for raising those issues. We are looking at strengthening consumer protection, full stop. Perhaps we could meet. I have not spoken to him about this issue, but I am more than happy to meet him, so that we can investigate the matter further with the OPSS if necessary.

Without this order, we will not be maximising the potential of the new regulator. The British public would ultimately have less protection from unsafe and non-compliant products. Law-abiding businesses would have less protection in maintaining and growing their businesses, and the UK economy, and that is not what this Government want. We are committed to making the UK product safety systems the best in the world, and ensuring that our regulators have the right tools to protect our people is a further step to achieving that goal. Therefore, I commend this statutory instrument to the House.

Question put and agreed to.
The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Will Quince): I beg to move, That the draft Child Support (Miscellaneous Amendments) Regulations 2019, which were laid before this House on 9 May, be approved.

These regulations amend child maintenance legislation to enable the delivery of the child maintenance compliance and arrears strategy.

We all know that, when parents work well together, their children fare better. A reformed child maintenance scheme based on that principle was launched in 2012 and administered by the Child Maintenance Service. This scheme was designed to encourage parents to work together following separation and, where possible, to make a private family-based arrangement for the child. Where parents are not able to do this, the statutory scheme is there as a fall-back option. I am pleased to say that, following staged implementation, the service is working well and largely avoiding the problems that beset the previous statutory child maintenance schemes. As the reformed scheme has been implemented, we have listened to the issues that hon. Members and external stakeholders have raised. This valuable input has informed our new child maintenance compliance and arrears strategy.

Last November, this House approved regulations tackling a number of those issues, closing down loopholes, introducing tough new sanctions for those who evade a number of those issues, closing down loopholes, strategy.

Our new child maintenance compliance and arrears strategy builds on those made last November. These regulations amend child maintenance legislation to enable the delivery of the child maintenance compliance and arrears strategy.

Let me turn first to the changes to powers to make deductions from benefits. All parents have an obligation to support their children regardless of their financial circumstances. Parents on benefits are liable to pay the flat rate of maintenance of £7 per week. If they do not pay voluntarily, we can take deductions directly from their benefit payment, plus a collection fee of £1.40. There are different rules surrounding what may be taken for ongoing maintenance and what may be taken for arrears.

The Child Maintenance Service can currently make weekly deductions of £8.40—a flat rate of maintenance at £7, plus a £1.40 collection fee—towards ongoing maintenance from certain benefits, and £1.20 towards arrears from a smaller number of benefits. In some cases, a total of £9.60 a week can be deducted. I want to make this policy fairer for all parents involved.

The regulations enable deductions towards arrears to be made from the same benefits from which the Child Maintenance Service can deduct ongoing maintenance. They also ensure that the service can deduct a maximum of £8.40 a week in all cases. They will stop deductions towards arrears and ongoing maintenance being taken at the same time, with arrears deductions being taken only after ongoing liability has been satisfied. This removes all current inconsistencies and means that arrears of child maintenance can be cleared at a faster rate. I am also proposing specific changes to deductions from universal credit. The Child Maintenance Service can already deduct £8.40 towards ongoing maintenance from universal credit, if the paying parent has no income from employment. The new regulations will allow the Child Maintenance Service to do the same where the paying parent has earnings in line with other benefits. This will only apply in cases where the paying parent is liable to pay only the flat rate—that is, based on earnings of £100 a week or less. This change means there will be a more efficient and consistent approach to clients on UC with similar financial circumstances.

Let me turn to the proposals regarding protected trust deeds. A protected trust deed is an arrangement in Scots law between a debtor and their creditors. In Scots law, child maintenance arrears that are covered by the deed cannot be collected once a parent enters into its terms. Although dividends may be received towards arrears while the deed is in operation, once it expires any arrears covered by the deed are legally uncollectable. At present, any child maintenance arrears are still held on child maintenance computer systems, even though they are no longer enforceable. The regulations will extend our write-off powers to cover arrears within the terms of a protected trust deed, once that deed has expired. This change keeps our legislation in line with that in Scotland and provides clarity to parents about the status of these arrears. It also stops the Child Maintenance Service holding information about uncollectable arrears indefinitely at a cost to the taxpayer.

There are occasions when child maintenance agents need to access premises to gather information, using powers of entry—whether to trace a parent, to recover child maintenance arrears or to ensure that the child maintenance calculation is as accurate as possible. We do this in a limited number of cases and when other measures to collect this information have failed. In line with the Protection of Freedoms Act 2012, we propose an additional safeguard to protect the public from unnecessary intrusion. The regulations require an inspector to apply for a judicial warrant where they are refused or expect to be refused access to premises, or where they cannot contact the occupier. Although the Child Maintenance Service cannot use its powers of entry to access a wholly private dwelling, this change would reassure the public that independent judicial consideration has been given to any request for inspection. I expect only about 20 judicial warrants to be sought per year, and the occupiers of these premises will have all the usual rights of appeal via magistrates courts in England and Wales, or sheriff courts in Scotland.

I am also proposing changes to the manner in which the Child Maintenance Service requests information from certain organisations. Mortgage lenders and occupational pension providers can be a valuable source of information where there is a need to trace a parent, to calculate a maintenance liability or to decide on the best enforcement power to use. To collect this information currently, the Child Maintenance Service has to arrange for one of our inspectors to visit. Repeat visits are often needed when the information is not readily available, and that can be costly and time-consuming. The regulations add mortgage lenders and occupational pension providers to the list of persons who are legally required to provide the service with information; that information is provided in writing, on request.
When calculating child maintenance, the Child Maintenance Service aims to produce a fair reflection of what the paying parent can afford. This is usually based on the taxable income figure provided by Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs. The income figure given to the Child Maintenance Service by HMRC is currently provided after any deductions for pension contributions, but before non-taxable allowable expenses are disregarded. Parents need to notify the service to get those non-taxable expenses disregarded from their income figure. I propose a change in the legislation to make it clear in law that the income figure used to calculate maintenance must be used after allowable expenses have been disregarded.

The regulations also include a small technical change to collection fees, which were introduced in 2014 and were aimed at encouraging collaboration. They accrue alongside ongoing maintenance and, as with maintenance liability, accumulate when left unpaid. Collection of these outstanding fees can be enforced as though they were unpaid child maintenance. The regulatory changes that I am proposing clarify this policy intent and will provide the courts with a clear direction on fees when a liability order is sought.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): Who decides on the level of fee—the court or the Department?

Will Quince: The fees and charges—20% for the paying parent and 4% for the receiving parent—are set by the Child Maintenance Service.

The regulations build on the success of the child maintenance reforms, further developing collection measures and information-gathering powers, helping to make child maintenance fairer for all parents and ensuring that we fully deliver on the commitments in the compliance and arrears strategy. I commend the regulations to the House.

2.56 pm

Mike Amesbury (Weaver Vale) (Lab): May I first welcome the Minister to his place?

These regulations are a series of changes and clarifications designed to make it easier to collect arrears and maintenance payments under the child maintenance scheme. The Opposition do not want to obstruct the measures, and we will support them today. We agree with the Minister that it is extremely important for parents to fulfil their obligations towards paying for the cost of bringing up their children. If parents fail to fulfil this obligation and fall into arrears, it is right that Government Departments step in to pursue them—and, as a last resort, through the social security payments system. In supporting this change, we are mindful that having £8.40 a week deducted from benefits for child maintenance arrears can be extremely difficult for somebody on a low income, which may be as low as £73.10 a week if they are claiming jobseeker’s allowance.

We are also too aware of the Government’s rather chaotic approach to our welfare and social security system, and the unacceptable levels of debt, poverty and growing food bank use that are largely driven by the universal credit reforms. However, this must be weighed against fairness towards the care-giver, who has to bear the additional costs of food, clothing, school expenses, childcare and other day-to-day costs of bringing up children. Child maintenance payments can be vital to families—especially those on low incomes—and to protecting children from poverty. According to the single parent charity Gingerbread, child maintenance alone lifts a fifth of low-income single parents out of poverty.

It is important to remember the context in which separated families are living. Lone parents are particularly vulnerable to poverty. According to the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, one in four lone parents is in persistent poverty—twice as many as any other group—and the inadequacy of the current social security system arguably makes child maintenance an even more vital source of income for struggling lone parents. Austerity cuts have driven lone parents further towards the brink, with the two-child limit and the benefit cap pushing three quarters of children in lone parent households further into poverty. The value of child benefit and child tax credit has not increased since 2015 due to the benefits freeze, making it harder to cover the costs associated with bringing up and looking after children. Meanwhile, the cost of childcare grows, according to the Child Poverty Action Group. The full cost of bringing up a child for a single parent has increased by 18% since 2012. Using social security as a vehicle for cuts is a political choice—and the choice has consequences, with over 4.1 million children now living in poverty.

Although we support the Government’s intention to continue making deductions from paying parents to pay off arrears after they have no maintenance liability, as stated by the Minister, I note that there has been no impact assessment of these regulations. Will he commit to a full impact assessment, and commit to monitoring this policy to guard against any unintended consequences of the change?

Mr Jim Cunningham: My hon. Friend makes a point about childcare. I do not know whether he has seen the reports today about the Government paying something like £5 an hour for childcare although the costs are a lot higher than that. That means, in effect, that a lot of families are being excluded from childcare. Does he agree that the Government should do something about that?

Mike Amesbury: I certainly do. I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention. This case has been highlighted in the media today by the shadow early years Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Batley and Spen (Tracy Brabin).

We agree with the regulations’ intention to extend deductions from universal credit to include cases where the paying parents’ household has earnings, but will the Minister provide clarification about the commencement of this policy? The Department for Work and Pensions consultation in December 2017 said:

“Changes to UC deductions would be implemented when UC is fully rolled out.”

However, it appears from the commencement regulation of the draft statutory instrument that the changes in respect of universal credit will take effect before roll-out has been completed. Is the Minister able to clarify that? Given that universal credit has been beset by so many problems and delays so far, will it be able to cope with yet another change to the system?
We welcome the DWP’s intention to reduce outstanding arrears. Indeed, its consultation on this issue said that its changes “would send a clear message to paying parents that failing to pay for their children is not an option. We will recover the arrears eventually, even if we have to wait until they claim State Pension.” However, that appears to be slightly at odds with the Department’s actions of December last year when it wrote off billions of pounds in arrears in child maintenance. Will the Minister supply an update on the progress of this arrears write-off and how many receiving parents have made representations asking for their arrears to be collected?

Alarming, according to the latest statistics, the level of arrears under the new CMS system appears to be creeping up, just as it did under the old system. Since the CMS began, a total of £259.2 million of child maintenance has been unpaid and should now be paid through the Collect and Pay service. That is 11% of all child maintenance due to have been paid since the service began. Although I do not doubt the commitment of the new Minister to tackling non-compliance and arrears, these figures start to make his words on the issue seem rather hollow. Does he have a performance target on the amount of child maintenance remaining unpaid?

Arrears can be compounded by the failure of enforcement in Direct Pay, where parents manage payments directly with each other. In its report on Direct Pay, published this year, Gingerbread reported complaints from parents that arrangements are prolonged by unclear thresholds of enforcement, and that there is inconsistent follow-up and very poor communication from caseworkers. It is very difficult to track enforcement in Direct Pay. Despite its being a central plank in the child maintenance system, the DWP does not track whether payments are made. As Gingerbread says, this means that the Department cannot report on compliance in 70% per cent of cases. Given its centrality to child maintenance arrangements, does the Minister not think it is now vital to track whether payments are being made under Direct Pay?

Labour Members would not contend with other measures in these regulations, including changes to information gathering—which will make things simpler and save the taxpayer money—powers of entry and the calculation change. However, I will finally raise an issue that is not dealt with in these regulations but is a major concern to separated families. Fees were introduced under the new system to encourage more family-based and Direct Pay arrangements. However, the evidence shows that, far from increasing collaboration between parents and prompting compliance, fees are deterring parents from using the CMS, and where parents do pay, it is a struggle to afford it. The Department for Work and Pensions itself has said that some parents are staying in an ineffective Direct Pay arrangement rather than moving to Collect and Pay. Does the Minister agree that it unfair to charge single parents for using the CMS system when often it is the only option available to them? Will he commit to reviewing the impact of fees on receiving parents who have experienced financial coercion and abuse? I look forward to his response.

3.6 pm

Mr William Wragg (Hazel Grove) (Con): I shall not detain the House for too long with my remarks on this important statutory instrument that has considerable effects on our constituents. I cannot, for the life of me, think why these Benches are not heaving at the moment.

I wish to draw two specific matters to the attention of my hon. Friend the Minister. I do so on the basis of understanding the fairness that there should be within this system for both the paying and the receiving parent. The first concerns income calculations. The SI makes several changes. However, what can be done to address the issue of mid-year salary reviews for the paying parent, which can lead to a significant unfairness? As I understand it, a maintenance calculation is meant to last for a whole tax year, subject to a change in income of 25%, up or down, within that year.

A constituent of mine from Marple has been making payments for his son since 2011. In 2017, he lost his job and briefly claimed benefits. He was fortunately able to find new work quickly, albeit on a significantly lower salary of 20% less than his previous job. He informed the CMS of his change in circumstances. However, because he fails the 25% test, the CMS is refusing to review the calculation, meaning that he is now making CMS payments based on a salary of over £7,000 more than he currently earns. As he is not earning that money, he does not have the money to pay, and this is therefore putting him in financial difficulties. He also has two other young children to care for in his current relationship. The policy is currently meant to cover scenarios such as losing or gaining employment completely, but not a change in job, role or salary. Ironically, had my constituent remained unemployed, his maintenance calculation would have been reduced, but by finding new work quickly, taking a pay cut and keeping up with his payments, he is now worse off, and that seems deeply unfair. Would my hon. Friend the Minister consider reducing the 25% threshold for a recalculation review to about 10% to 15% to give a better deal in such cases?

Let me now give the other perspective, of the receiving parent. A constituent of mine from Offerton informs me that she has been divorced from her children’s father for seven years, and in all that time has only received approximately six months of maintenance payments from him towards the upbringing of their two sons. She received a letter in February this year informing her that the CMS plans to write off the £11,867.99 that is owed to her in unpaid child support. I find that course of action astonishing.

The issue is not the father and ex-husband’s ability to pay, but his refusal to do so, as he is a successful self-employed director with his own limited company. A deduction of earnings order seems rather powerless, as, being his own boss, he is unlikely to enforce such an order against himself. More than £11,000 is an astonishing amount of money in the context of raising a child. What can be done to enable the CMS to better recover significant maintenance payments and arrears from people outside the standard PAYE tax system?

3.10 pm

Angela Crawley (Lanark and Hamilton East) (SNP): I welcome the new Minister to his role. I appreciate fully that it is not an enviable task to strike the delicate balance between ensuring that families and parents receive the support they need and ensuring that those who should be paying and are responsible for their children do so. It is no easy task, and I recognise that he has a hard task ahead of him.
The Child Maintenance Service ultimately provides vital financial support where parents are no longer able to work together. The fact that all parents ought to be responsible for the welfare of their children is unequivocal, but many families find themselves in a situation where they are either not receiving the financial support they are due or are unable to provide the financial support they would like to, due to their circumstances.

The historical changes to child maintenance still impact many families. The announcements regarding trust deeds, mortgage providers and methods of payment collection are broadly welcome. The reality is that most of the families who rely on this service are vulnerable. Many parents rely on this support, whether they are the receiving parent who relies on it to bring up their children, or the paying parent who finds themselves in financial hardship.

Despite the range of powers that the Child Maintenance Service has at its disposal, many receiving parents find that those powers are not being fully utilised. Examples have been given of paying parents finding ways around the system, and the pursuit of child maintenance is perhaps not being fully utilised. While further powers are welcome, it is important to consider the impact of these consecutive changes on many families who are reliant on this vital financial support.

There are examples of individuals evading the system and of frustrated parents who are unable to get the support they require. There are frankly many other people who are simply in a great level of poverty, regardless of whether they are the receiving or paying parent, but they are at the mercy of a bureaucratic system that does not recognise that. The charges applied to recovering and paying through the collect and pay service are often perceived as a disincentive, but there is frankly no alternative for many families.

I reiterate the concern that neither an impact assessment nor a family test has been done for these regulations, as far as I am aware. We know that under universal credit, those in debt struggle to pay for essential items. The possibility of pushing people further into debt has to be considered. Unfortunately, some people are in danger of being forced into a vulnerable place where they rely on food banks and Scottish welfare fund crisis grants, and those are people in receipt of universal credit. Does the Minister think that these changes will increase the number of people relying on mechanisms such as food banks and the Scottish welfare fund? How many cases throughout the UK does he think the regulations will affect? If a family test has been done for these regulations, why have the Government not published it? If a family test has not been done, what was the reason for that?

My final questions to the Minister are about the Cabinet Office guidelines on fairness in debt collection. The stated aim of the Cabinet Office is to "continually improve how government interacts with people in debt, particularly those in vulnerable circumstances". Were the Cabinet Office guidelines taken into account when these changes were considered? Does the 40% maximum deduction rate for universal credit, which is soon to be reduced to 30%, take into account this change for those on universal credit who are paying back child maintenance arrears?

Many families in my constituency are reliant on the Child Maintenance Service, and I would like to ensure that, whether they are the paying or receiving parent, this is the fairest system that they can use, in circumstances where they are unable to use any other service. Any changes to the legislation can have unintended consequences, and consecutive changes to the Child Support Agency and the Child Maintenance Service have had an impact. Those in financial hardship, whether they are the paying or receiving parent, must be kept in mind. I want to know that these changes to legislation will not push people further into poverty and hardship, and I hope that the Minister has considered those points.

3.16 pm

Will Quince: First, let me thank all hon. Members for their comments and the good-natured and constructive approach they have taken. With your permission, Madam Deputy Speaker, I would like to take this opportunity to briefly respond to a number of the points raised.

The hon. Members for Weaver Vale (Mike Amesbury) and for Lanark and Hamilton East (Angela Crawley) asked about universal credit. In October, the maximum deduction for universal credit will go down from 40% to 30%. I will, of course, continue to monitor this policy in the way that I monitor all policies in my role.

The hon. Member for Lanark and Hamilton East asked about the family test. We conducted a family test, which concluded that there would be no adverse impact on family formation, family life or couple separation as a result of the proposals. As the Minister with responsibility for the family test, I think Members would expect no less. The family test was presented to the Social Security Advisory Committee as part of its scrutiny of the deductions from benefits provisions.

The hon. Lady talked about charges and the fairness thereof. It is important to say that charges account for about 10.5% of the costs of running the service. It is important that we operate a service that is fair to both the paying parent and the receiving parent. Most importantly, it must be fair to the children, who are the ultimate beneficiaries.

My hon. Friend the Member for Hazel Grove (Mr Wragg) raised a couple of points. Knowing what a determined campaigner and champion for the good folk of Hazel Grove he is, it would be churlish of me not to say that I would be happy to meet him to discuss this issue further. To set his expectations, there are no plans to change the 25% threshold. Nevertheless, I would be interested to hear his thoughts and any particular case that he would like to raise. I will come on to talk about enforcement, which he also raised.

My hon. Friend asked about deductions on earnings from people outside the PAYE system. If a parent is employed, we can make deductions of up to a maximum of 40% of their net income. For the self-employed, it is a bit more complicated, but we have a wide range of enforcement powers we can use, such as making deductions direct from a parent’s bank account—including, since December 2018, from joint and business accounts, which was a significant step.

The Opposition spokesman raised a point about when UC deductions will change and when that change will be implemented. We are aiming to start UC deductions from earnings when this package of changes is introduced and UC has been rolled out. He also asked whether a
deduction from a parent’s benefit will affect their relationship with the child. That is a very important point. We will—I will, certainly—very carefully monitor the implementation of this policy, and also deductions of benefits. Any deduction from a parent’s benefit requires consideration of the welfare of any child—he would expect nothing less—and if we concluded that a deduction from benefit would negatively affect the child or children, it would not be taken. I hope that reassures the hon. Gentleman.

The hon. Gentleman asked about parents who are put on direct pay, and questioned whether the CMS does anything when payments are not made. The CMS still provides support for direct pay clients, so it is just not true to suggest that that support is not available. Those who do not receive their maintenance in full and on time should contact the CMS straight away, so that the case can be moved to the collect and pay service to enforce payments and any arrears.

It is important to say that, at the start of any case and at each annual review, parents are notified of what to do if their arrangements break down. The CMS sends text messages—SMS messages—to all direct pay parents three months after they have set up their arrangements to remind them to contact the CMS if their arrangement is not working for any reason. Information is available online, and is also provided by the CMS and Child Maintenance Options. It is important to say that, since March 2017, there have been sustained increases in the number of direct pay arrangements moving to collect and pay, although it is also important to note that this has levelled off in the past two quarters.

The Opposition spokesman also asked how many parents have made representations for their debt to be collected. At present, only a small proportion of cases have got to this stage in the process, so we are yet to publish data on that. That is a question he may want to ask me a little bit further down the line.

Last November, the House passed regulations to close loopholes, update the child maintenance calculation, deal with historical debt and bring in tough new sanctions for those who persistently evade their responsibilities. This second package of regulations builds on the first. The changes will make deductions from benefit fairer, tackle unenforceable debt, improve our information-gathering processes, and update calculation and fees regulations. I commend this statutory instrument to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Sustainable Development Goals

3.23 pm

The Secretary of State for International Development (Rory Stewart): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the Sustainable Development Goals.

It is a great privilege to speak on the sustainable development goals, and it is a very unusual one for the International Development Secretary because this afternoon I will be speaking about the UK’s performance at home, not abroad. The global goals apply not just to other people’s countries, but to our own. This is a fundamental principle—a fundamental principle about being honest with ourselves, but also about learning some humility and learning, through doing it in our own country, about some of the struggles that other people are going through in their own countries.

We will be reporting in a formal report to the UN after this debate in Parliament, and I hope this debate in Parliament will help inform some of the report we send. This is the result of 350 organisations having contributed so far, with 35 events, 200 case studies and now this parliamentary debate. I really believe that the single guiding principle of the Department for International Development, which is of leaving no one behind, should guide our approach to thinking about Britain.

In presenting my brief remarks to the House, I am reminded of another thing I have learned through this process about dealing with opposite numbers in countries abroad. It is the necessary balance between pointing out problems in our own country and balancing it with our pride in and our optimism about our own country. This would be true for a development Minister in Nepal or in Rwanda. They, too, often feel—as I must, a little bit, at this Dispatch Box—the necessity of balancing talking about the negatives with talking about the things that we are genuinely proud of as a Government.

The starting point is that this is, for all the flaws and all the things we grumble about, a truly extraordinary country. Quite literally and quite technically, this country has never been so healthy and it has never been so educated. Development in this country, if it is compared with development elsewhere in the world, has been quite staggering. In the mid-19th century, life expectancy in this country hovered around 40; it is nearly twice that today. In other words, in the mid-19th century, life expectancy in this country was roughly comparable to that of rural Afghanistan. Even relatively recently, we have seen a halving in infant mortality in this country since 1985. Well within our own lifetimes, we have halved infant mortality.

This is of course true across the world; it is not just Britain. In 1980, 41% of the people in the world were living in extreme poverty. Today, only 9% of the population of the world is living in extreme poverty. For all the criticisms we make, the story across the world is one of progress. In comparing Britain with other countries, it is important to remember that we are not comparing like with like; there is an apples and oranges issue. Here we have a significant issue with relative poverty, but that is quite different from the type of absolute poverty we are talking about in somewhere like eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo.
Stephen Twigg (Liverpool, West Derby) (Lab/Co-op): I welcome the opportunity of today’s debate, and I congratulate the Secretary of State on his appointment. Is he able to confirm that, when the UK makes its submission to the UN, we will make reference to every single one of the goals, targets and indicators for both domestic and international implementation?

Rory Stewart: Yes, I am able to confirm that. I hope my distinguished colleague the Chair of the International Development Committee will also feel that we have been quite rigorous and quite tough on ourselves, and have set quite high standards. This is a very open society, and there is no point for us as a Government in trying to hide. The statistics are out there in public, and people can see them from the Office for National Statistics, so we have tried to be as fair and frank as possible about the challenges we face and what we have achieved.

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): The Secretary of State will know that the UN special rapporteur described the levels of poverty in the UK recently as “systemic” and “tragic”—I think those were the words—and that seems to have been rather glibly dismissed by some of his colleagues. Of the five goals on which the UK is focusing when it comes to the voluntary national review, why is goal 2—ending hunger—not in there when we know that the extent of food poverty, particularly household food poverty, in this country is so extreme?

Rory Stewart: That is a good challenge, which I think will come up again and again in these debates and in the response to the reviews. We have significant problems in our country—people will refer to, for example, food banks. I recently had a conversation that got to the heart of the matter with a Nigerian pastor who has just begun his ministry in Croydon. He was reflecting on his experience of poverty in Britain and in Nigeria. He said that there was definitely poverty in both contexts, but that it was very different. His brother had just died in hospital in Nigeria because he was unable to access basic healthcare. Of course, in Croydon, he deals with people who have significant problems, particularly with income. He talked about women who are struggling to afford sanitary products and about food banks. However, he also said that it was worth bearing in mind that those people have completely free access to healthcare and education, a water supply and shelter, so we come back time and again to the relationship between absolute and relative poverty.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): Following on from the point that my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy) made, in any city in this country there will be areas where life expectancy is lower than in other parts of that city. We still have disparities in wealth and poverty, particularly in the north, but also in the midlands and the south. There is a lot of work to be done. Although we have a national health service and the third world does not have such things—I agree with the Secretary of State about that and that it is a matter of balance—I hope that the right hon. Gentleman will draw attention at the United Nations to some of the progress we have made.

Rory Stewart: That is the right tone in approaching the subject. There is an important fundamental issue: when we think about other people’s countries, we often forget about politics. We often talk as though development in somebody else’s country is simply a matter of experts from the World Bank sitting down with a piece of paper. Yet development in any country is deeply political. People who drive development in other countries are politicians—members of political parties—and there are Oppositions who challenge them. Many of the problems in development—defensiveness, cover-ups, lack of transparency and progress—stem from the fact that we do not understand the politics well enough. The debate is therefore a good way of understanding some of the challenges in, for example, eastern DRC. People might believe that the issue around Ebola is just a technical question of getting the vaccines on the ground, but the basic issue is that the area is controlled by Opposition insurgency groups, which have a big problem with the capital. Politics is at the heart of all that.

For this country, I will move quickly through the global goals, looking at them essentially through the lens of five Ps—people, planet, prosperity, peace and partnership—and trying in every case to give examples of where we are doing well, where we are doing badly and the strengths that we have to build on. Looking at the UK as a whole is well beyond my brain and that of anyone in the House—and I am well aware that there are many experts in the House who know far more about individual areas of domestic policy than I do. I will attempt to present now what we will present to the United Nations as a way of trying to take a snapshot of Britain in 2019.

There have been significant improvements in healthcare even relatively recently. For example, stillbirths in this country have reduced by 18.8% since 2010. However, on the negative side, we need to do a great deal more on particular forms of cancer, on heart attacks and on stroke, where we do not achieve the results of some comparator developed countries. We have a strength to build on—the NHS, which is a truly remarkable organisation. It is very difficult to think of equivalents elsewhere in the world that have that key point of being free at the point of access. There are countries that have done better than us on cancer survival rates where healthcare is bankrupting for a family. It can mean the destruction of a family and the absence of health insurance can drive people to the wall.

We have reached the extraordinary stage where nearly half our population now goes to university compared with only 3% when my mother went to university. That is a big change since my mother was young. However, we can do much more in education. We are not doing as well as we can on basic numeracy and literacy and technical education compared with some of our comparators. We are also perhaps not thinking hard enough about the effect that robotics and AI will have on the world of work. Hundreds of thousands of people are at risk of losing their jobs to new technologies and we need to have bursaries for people in mid-life to retrain for a new world of work. However, to come back to the basic point of building on strengths, in our country, as hon. Members will have heard again and again from the Dispatch Box, 85% of children are in good or outstanding schools.

We have heard about equality, on which we have very significant challenges. In addition to the question raised by the hon. Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy), there are other areas in this country that we do not talk
about enough—for example, the elderly poor. This area can genuinely be shocking. I feel that in my constituency if I see an 85-year-old woman looking after a 92-year-old doubly incontinent man, having to wake up every two hours through the night. That is a genuinely shocking thing.

I sometimes feel, coming back from Nepal or the Congo, that our family and community support structures for the elderly are not necessarily what they are in some other parts of the developing world. On the other hand, on the positive side, we can point out that in this country income inequality has, unusually among advanced countries, declined.

On the planet, there is a balance between three things. Yes, we are very proud that we have gone 300 hours without coal-fired power and that we have reduced our carbon emissions more than many comparable advanced countries, but nobody can get around the fact that we are facing a huge climate planet emergency. There is an enormous amount to do and there is simply no point being complacent or talking about our achievements in the past. There is a huge amount more that Britain can be doing on technology and research and development. For example, to stop China building another 300 gigawatt coal-fired power station, we should be developing solar technology, light spectrum technology and solar film to drive down the marginal costs. That is why, as the Secretary of State for DFID, I want to double the amount we spend within our budget on climate and the environment.

On prosperity, we are leading the world in certain sectors. We are doing very, very well in financial services and technology—I have been astonished by some of the robotics and AI companies I have seen recently—but we have a big problem with productivity. There is a big challenge in northern England in particular, where we really need to get infrastructure on the ground. We have not yet unleashed the potential that could come from, for example, properly connecting Newcastle, Carlisle and Glasgow, or properly connecting Leeds and Manchester, which is the huge opportunity.

There are, however, strengths we can build on. The most obvious is that, if one looks at the elections in the 1970s, the great issue in this country was of course unemployment. With all the challenges we have in our country, the achievements on employment have been quite remarkable. In particular, compared with 2015, 700,000 more people with disabilities are now in employment. There has also been a slight reduction—not a big enough reduction, but a slight reduction in that period—in the gender pay gap.

On peace—the penultimate issue on which we are measuring ourselves—crime has been falling. At the same time, however, we have a serious problem around knife crime. We have an enormous amount to learn from Glasgow’s public health approach to knife crime. We have lost only two soldiers on active service since 2014. We live in a much more peaceful world in relation to Britain’s activities overseas. That would have been almost unimaginable for a Minister to say from this Dispatch Box at any time, probably, in the past millennium—if this Dispatch Box had been around for a millennium.

Finally, on partnership, this country has an incredible voluntary sector and an astonishing civil society. We all feel that in all of our constituencies—I feel that in my constituency, as all hon. Members will in theirs—but we are not yet harnessing it properly. Amazing community schemes on community land trusts, community broadband and community planning are not being properly reinforced and followed up.

There are a lot of things that we could address. In recent meetings, for example, people have pointed out that if your mother lives in Middlesbrough and you live in London, could we not have a situation whereby somebody whose mother lives in London while they live in Middlesbrough visited your mother while you visited theirs? A lot of people would like to do that sort of thing, but as a society we are simply not good enough at tapping that kind of voluntary energy and bringing it together.

Given that I am often accused of being too gentle with those on the Opposition Benches, I am going to provoke them by saying that there is an example of partnership from which we can learn. I am going to pick possibly the most unpopular subject for those on the Opposition Benches: the privatised water industry. The extraordinary thing about the privatised water industry since 1980 is that by privatising water we have brought in £78 billion of investment that would not otherwise have come in. Water quality in this country is now at 99.6% and we are five times less likely to have an outage on our water. That is at a cost to the person of £1 a day for your water, in and out—an extraordinary achievement.

Mr Jim Cunningham: I think the right hon. Gentleman was watching Margaret Thatcher’s speech on privatisation last night and is trying to imitate her here today.

Rory Stewart: That is the greatest compliment I could receive as a leadership candidate in this House—thank you very much.

In conclusion, we in this country, as all parties and all nations, have together achieved an incredible amount over the last 100 years. In my constituency, when my predecessor’s predecessor, Willie Whitelaw, was the Member of Parliament for Penrith and The Border, a third of my constituents had no indoor lavatories and a third had mains electricity in their homes. We have moved completely away from that world since the second world war. We are in a very different world but it should not be one of complacency; it should be a world of us all working together to make things much better. The biggest challenge in this country, as I will indicate in my foreword to the UN, is adult social care.

I began with the thesis that one of the problems in development is politics. If the House wants a classic example of the way in which a good, technocratic solution to a problem in this country has been hampered by politics, just as good solutions are hampered in other countries by politics, take adult social care. There have been dozens of White Papers and Green Papers over decades, royal commissions in and out and parties in and out proposing solutions, and we still do not have the solution in place. What I shall be saying is that we need to show some humility. We need to learn from this. We need to reach across the House and work with other parties to solve the great unfinished revolution of our society, which began with the NHS dealing with people who are ill but did not properly deal with the vulnerable, the frail and the elderly. If we can tap that together, Britain can go back to the world not arrogant, preening or presenting itself as a model to the world, but presenting itself as a partner with the world.
Kerry McCarthy: The Secretary of State is giving a characteristically thoughtful speech. I do not want to cast any doubt on what he is saying—I agree about the need to cross party boundaries when we try to find solutions to these issues—but I wonder whether it is really possible for him to do it from the Department for International Development, as opposed to, say, the Cabinet Office, leading on the domestic delivery of the sustainable development goals. Will he say a bit about how he can persuade his perhaps less thoughtful colleagues to come to the table?

Rory Stewart: The hon. Lady has put her finger on a very important point. In the end, it is all very well setting these kinds of goals, wearing the kind of badge that I am wearing and signing up to the things that we believe in, but this is about leadership right the way through Government. It is about people sharing a vision of the kind of world we want to live in and of what sustainable development means, feeling in our bones and sinews the connection between our contribution to poverty and the environment and how cities, communities, clean water, clean air, gender equality, productivity and employment all come together not only to provide a society that we are proud of, but perhaps above all—as Britain continues as a partner with the world—a world that we can be proud of: a world that is greener, fairer, more united.

3.43 pm

Dan Carden (Liverpool, Walton) (Lab): I pay tribute to the Secretary of State, who I think has an important engagement in around two hours’ time—perhaps talking about saving the world is a pretty good warm-up act for talking about how to save the Tory party in his meeting later today.

The sustainable development goals set out an ambitious vision for the world: a world that is free from hunger and poverty, where men and women have equality, where everyone, regardless of income, can realise their right to health, education, water, energy and decent work and where peace, justice and climate action are top of the agenda. It is a vision that no one could disagree with. The crucial thing about the SDGs is that they are universal. Unlike their predecessors, the millennium development goals, the SDGs have to be realised by all countries, including our own.

I want to raise one concern. In last Thursday’s business statement, the Leader of the House announced a “general debate on the UK voluntary national review on the sustainable development goals.”—[Official Report, 6 June 2019; Vol. 661, c. 271.]

Today’s debate was meant to focus on the UK’s own voluntary national review process. I accept that the Secretary of State did his best to talk about the UK’s report, but let us bear in mind that the report is meant to go to the UN in less than three days.

A further question to be answered is why responsibility for the UK’s voluntary national review should sit with DFID: an entirely outward, international-facing Department. It is clear, and has been stated on the record, that the domestic delivery of the SDGs is a function for the whole Government. The Cabinet Office should be co-ordinating the process.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle (Brighton, Kemptown) (Lab/Co-op): Does my hon. Friend share my disappointment that the Government did a VNR only at the end of the cycle? The Netherlands has already done one and is embarking on a second. The Government should consider doing a domestic VNR and an international VNR as separate processes. Donor countries do only a domestic VNR, but we are a country that both gives and has to look at what we are doing ourselves. We should probably do that as two separate processes involving different stakeholders and people.

Dan Carden: My hon. Friend makes an important point. I will come to some of the criticisms of the Government’s handling of the process.

Mr Jim Cunningham: Following on from my hon. Friend the Member for Brighton, Kemptown (Lloyd Russell-Moyle), some months ago a United Nations report was critical of poverty in this country. I would like to hear more about how the Government will address that. Does my hon. Friend not agree that that should also be a top priority?

Dan Carden: Absolutely. I will come to the special rapporteur’s report in a few moments.

Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): Does my hon. Friend share my concern that one of the reasons for the conflation is that there are still Conservative Members who would love to remove the 0.7% contribution of our national income towards foreign aid? It has already been diluted. Does he worry that that is in play according to some of the leadership candidates?

Dan Carden: My hon. Friend is right. The previous International Development Secretary looked at ways to water down the 0.7% commitment, although this Secretary of State committed to it at International Development questions last week. I asked whether he would call on his opponents in the Tory leadership race to make the same commitment, but I do not think we have heard much from them. It is certainly a worry throughout the sector.

As I have said, the Cabinet Office should be co-ordinating the process. We heard the Secretary of State try to talk about some of the domestic issues, but they go far further than those he could elaborate on. In particular, following numerous complaints from UK charities that the Government are not taking the SDGs or the voluntary national review seriously, it is remarkable that there does not seem to be even a basic understanding of who is responsible for what. I was therefore somewhat surprised to see on the Order Paper yesterday that the focus of this debate had changed, shifting unannounced away from the UK’s own performance to the much broader topic of the SDGs in general. The scope of the debate now covers the whole world—quite an extension.

There could not be a bigger agenda out there than changing the world by 2030, yet there is little or no leadership in the UK. There appears to be poor co-ordination and zero vision. The Secretary of State may be very good at talking to people in the streets and on Twitter at the moment, but the truth is his Government and Departments have given up talking to one another.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle: The UN Secretary-General has said that the process in a voluntary national review should be for the Government to consult Parliament and the Opposition, as well as members of the Government...
and civil society. Does my hon. Friend agree that the Government have been pretty lacking in real, detailed consultation during this process, particularly in Parliament? We have had one or two informal sessions and an inquiry by the International Development Committee, but there has been no proactive, issue-by-issue engagement on the Government’s part.

Dan Carden: Both the International Development Committee and the Environmental Audit Committee have expressed concern about a lack of co-ordination and a lack of discussion of these issues in Parliament. The Secretary of State was not able to address that in his speech, but I hope that the Minister will do so later. Our VNR report is due to be with the United Nations in just three days’ time. It is a blatant attempt to sweep under the carpet the UK’s failure to make any progress towards meeting the global goals for its own citizens—its failure to tackle poverty, hunger and homelessness in our own country, the fifth richest on the planet. There is a total lack of leadership, and I have to ask what on earth is going on, because we have been given no satisfactory details about the process today.

In the meantime, let me set out what I do know about how we, as a country, are doing on the SDGs. I do not need to be shadow Secretary of State to make these judgments; I can talk about my own constituency in north Liverpool and the poverty that I see there.

The first and most crucial goal is the ending of poverty. In that regard, sadly, we have little to be proud of here in the UK. Under this Tory leadership, one fifth of the population are currently living in poverty. In the past year alone, the Trussell Trust issued 1.6 million emergency food packages across the country, more than half of which went to children. Rough sleeping has risen by 165% since the Tory party took power in 2010, and child homelessness has surged by 80% in the same period.

The UN special rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights was damning of poverty in the UK. He said that it was “patently unjust and contrary to British values that so many people are living in poverty.”

His report warned that on current trends, child poverty rates could hit 40% by 2021. He said:

“The results? 14 million people, a fifth of the population, live in poverty. Four million of these are more than 50% below the poverty line, and 1.5 million are destitute, unable to afford basic essentials. The widely respected Institute for Fiscal Studies predicts a 7% rise in child poverty between 2015 and 2022, and various sources predict child poverty rates of as high as 40%. For almost one in every two children to be poor in twenty-first century Britain is not just a disgrace, but a social calamity and an economic disaster, all rolled into one.”

What was the Government’s response to that damning report? They tried to smear it. However, I can tell the House that I see poverty day in, day out, with my own eyes, in my constituency, where 40% of children are already growing up in poverty. A study by the Centre for Cities revealed Liverpool to be the city hardest hit by austerity, with a cut of £816 per head in day-to-day spending since 2010. A staggering 64% has been slashed from our local authority budget; 3,000 council staff have been lost; and local services are stretched to the limit. Liverpool now has the second highest levels of destitution in the UK, and that means a lack of basic essentials, including food and shelter. According to the Office for National Statistics, even life expectancy is starting to creep backwards in Liverpool. Austerity is literally cutting lives short.

The stark reality faced by so many of the people I represent could not be further from the rosy picture painted by Ministers at the Dispatch Box. That is exactly what Philip Alston meant when he described an “almost complete disconnect” between what Ministers and the public see, and it is why so many people were outraged when our multimillionaire Chancellor said that he does not accept that large numbers of British people are living in poverty; he really should take a step outside Downing Street.

Hunger is addressed as one of the global goals, and I have with me the “Agenda 2030” paper, which explains the UK Government’s approach to delivering the global goals for sustainable development at home and abroad. Goal 2 of “zero hunger” does not even mention food banks in this country; it talks about secure farming and childhood obesity, but it is incredible that a report on how we are delivering on the global goals in this country does not even mention food banks. I hope that the Secretary of State will take this opportunity to finally break with the state of denial that has shamefully typified his Government when it comes to the scale of poverty here in the UK.

Far from eradicating poverty, this Government have exacerbated it. It is no wonder that they decided to shift the focus of today’s debate at the last minute rather than face up to these realities at home, because what an embarrassment it is that this country will go tail between our legs to the UN high-level meeting in July. With our global reputation already smashed to pieces, this Government have only two choices: double down on their attacks on the special rapporteur or admit that our own record on poverty is, despite our being one of the wealthiest countries in the world, utterly shameful. With such an appalling domestic picture, how can this Government seriously be trusted to lead on work eradicating poverty globally?

Let me now say a few words about our work towards achieving the SDGs internationally. DFID staff work extremely hard to bring about meaningful change in people’s lives across the world, and we in the Labour party fully back the UK’s role as a global champion of international development. Although I am grateful for the Secretary of State’s confirmation just last week in the Chamber that he supports the continuation of the 0.7% spending targets, unlike some of his colleagues, I remain deeply concerned about the way that aid has been spent in recent years. Under this Government, aid has been diluted and diverted away from poverty reduction towards spending in the UK’s national interest, including for the benefit of UK commercial and business interests.

If we are serious about achieving the SDGs at a global level, we must prioritise supporting people across the world in seeking to build their own public services. We know from our own experience right here in the UK how essential free schooling—state schooling—and our national health service are in ensuring equality and that people can have a dignified life. That is why in government a Labour DFID would establish a dedicated unit for public services within the Department.

Another major barrier to achieving the SDGs both domestically and globally is this Government’s policy incoherence. I welcome the Secretary of State’s plans to...
prioritise the climate crisis, which is crucial to achieving goals 13 and 7 on climate action and on clean energy, but his colleagues do not appear to be on the same page. It is this Government who have shut down the dedicated Department of Energy and Climate Change. It is this Government who continue to promote fracking and support the growth of fossil fuels overseas; over 99% of all energy support provided by UK Export Finance goes to fossil fuels. And it is this Government who continue to spend our aid money on new oil and gas projects overseas through the prosperity fund and CDC investments.

The Government’s policy is not just incoherent in the area of climate; it is also fuelling conflict through arms sales. According to Christian Aid, while DFID allocates at least 50% of its development spending to conflict-affected regions, more than 50% of UK arms exports are now sold to countries within these same regions. Meanwhile, ongoing arms sales to Saudi Arabia fuel the conflict in Yemen, directly undermining goal 16 on peace.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle: Does my hon. Friend find it appalling, as I do, that British fighter jets using British ammunition and flown by people trained in Britain on appalling, as I do, that British fighter jets using British ammunition and flown by people trained in Britain on

Dan Carden: I am pleased to agree 100% with my hon. Friend, and I congratulate him on his tireless efforts to highlight these utterly disgraceful practices.

I should like to raise a final point relating to the SDG agenda. If we are to bring about the kind of world envisaged under the SDGs, we need to start talking about the structural causes of poverty. Debates about the sustainable development goals have become dominated by discussions on how to mobilise trillions in additional finance and, in particular, how we can mobilise private finance and philanthropic funds. This is not good enough; charity alone will not solve the world’s problems, especially if we are ignoring the reasons that these problems exist in the first place.

I have said before, and it really cannot be said enough, that poverty is not simply about a lack of funds and that the answer to global poverty does not lie in taking a begging bowl to the world’s billionaires? Will he instead use the UK’s moment at the high-level political forum in July to raise the questions on the structural causes of poverty that are missing from the current agenda?

To conclude, the UK’s voluntary national review, which is due to be with the United Nations this week, has been mishandled and botched by this Government. It has lacked leadership; it has not been taken seriously from the start; and today the Government have backtracked on their own decision to have a full parliamentary debate on it within days of announcing it. It is a total and utter embarrassment. If this process had been taken seriously, it would have allowed the Government to face up to their record in office over nine years and own up to the utter failure of austerity. I hope that this Secretary of State will therefore use this as a moment to take stock of his Government’s failure on poverty and inequality here at home in the UK.

4.4 pm

Chris Law (Dundee West) (SNP): I welcome the new Secretary of State to his place. I have been in this role for two years, and I now face my third Secretary of State for International Development. However, I thank him for his humility regarding some of the issues that this country faces in trying to meet our sustainable development goals. He also talked about a third of the homes in his constituency not having an outside toilet when Willie Whitelaw was the MP, but only half of homes in Dundee had an outside toilet under Churchill. He was flushed out by an MP for the Scottish prohibition party, which I was surprised to learn given that we are the home of whisky, gin and fine ale.

It is important to remember that, back when the sustainable development goals were adopted in 2015, all 193 nations committed to achieving a transformational development agenda by 2030—a significant diplomatic achievement to say the least. It is also worth remembering that the Paris climate accord was agreed in the same year, so perhaps 2015 was a high point in recent times. The UN describes the SDGs as a shared blueprint for peace and prosperity for people and the planet, now and into the future. The rallying cry throughout the negotiations was “leave no one behind” yet sadly, from day one in 2015, the UK Government have been lagging in their commitment to implement and achieve the 17 goals.

The 2015 UK aid strategy did not refer to the SDGs. The 2016 bilateral and multilateral development reviews only briefly mentioned the goals. DFID’s 2017 report on the Government’s approach to the SDGs fell far short of the comprehensive implementation plan that the International Development Committee had asked for, while the Environmental Audit Committee stated that there was an “accountability gap” across Government.

Despite the lack of appropriate focus and co-ordination given to the SDGs, the UK will present its own voluntary national review to the UN at the high-level political forum on sustainable development. The VNR will assess the UK’s progress on the SDGs, indicating what the UK has done to date and setting out how it will push forward towards achieving the sustainable development goals by 2030. It is therefore important that we are having this debate today to draw attention to the significance
of the SDGs and to spell out how vital they are in addressing the global challenges we face, including those related to poverty, inequality, climate, environmental degradation, prosperity, peace and justice, and in ensuring a better and more sustainable future for all.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle: The hon. Gentleman celebrates the fact that this debate is happening today, but should it not have happened a year ago and been followed up with 17 sectoral debates in which we could have discussed in depth how Britain is faring? This should have been a debate to wrap up and to prepare for how to present Britain to the UN with a united face. The problem is that this process has been a farce and has not been given the full weight that it deserved.

Chris Law: I completely agree with the hon. Gentleman. The SDGs could be a comprehensive blueprint for each Department, regardless of who is in government, because they also provide the Opposition with an opportunity to contribute.

Furthermore, it is critical that people across Government listen to us today and use this opportunity to commit to a coherent and robust SDG implementation plan in order to achieve all 17 goals domestically and to support other countries to achieve them.

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech. Does he agree that it is important to raise awareness of the goals? Incorporating elements of them into the curriculum so that young people can fully participate would be an excellent idea.

Chris Law: I agree with my hon. Friend. In fact, I visited a local primary school in the past month or two to discuss global leadership, and I was impressed that the children were able to list all 17 goals. Getting the SDGs into the national curriculum across these islands is vital. The next generation will inherit both what we do right and what we do wrong, so now is the time to put this topic front and centre.

It is no secret that the SNP is working towards an independent Scotland, but crucially we want this process because we want to play our part as global citizens, to improve the lives of people at home and abroad, and to aim to be world-leading in everything we do. The Scottish Government’s actions on the sustainable development goals typify that. Not only was First Minister Nicola Sturgeon one of the first national leaders to commit publicly to the SDGs, but Scotland has continued to set the pace for the rest of the UK. The First Minister noted in 2015:

“The national and international dimensions to poverty and inequality are interlinked. Scotland cannot act with credibility overseas, if we are blind to inequality here at home. And our ambitions for a fairer Scotland are undermined, without global action to tackle poverty, promote prosperity and to tackle climate change.”

The UK Government would benefit from listening to those words. Let me outline some evidence of what is being done.

Commenting on the Scottish Government’s attempts to reduce inequalities, the Scottish Council for Voluntary Organisations noted that:

“great efforts are being made to help Scotland progress towards the SDGs.”

It highlighted the introduction of a new advisory council on women and girls as just one example of Scotland’s efforts to reduce inequalities.

Similarly, in the 2018 “Measuring Up” report by UK Stakeholders for Sustainable Development, Scotland’s target to eradicate child poverty by 2030 through the Child Poverty (Scotland) Act 2017 was praised as “ambitious” and the Child Poverty Action Group’s “The Cost of the School Day” programme featured as a case study for UK best practice. We should just think how that compares with the comments made by the UN special rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights, Professor Philip Alston. He said that the UK’s social safety net has been “deliberately removed and replaced with a harsh and uncaring ethos” and that the UK Government have inflicted “great misery” on their people with “punitive, mean-spirited, and often callous” austerity policies. How did the UK Government reply? Denial.

The priorities of this Conservative Government have been laid bare by the fact that the only SDG target for which the UK has received a green rating is under goal 8, on decent work and economic growth:

“Strengthen the capacity of domestic financial institutions to encourage and to expand access to banking, insurance and financial services for all.”

That is almost laughable, because I do not think a single Member represents a constituency that has not been affected by local bank closures on the high street. Surely this serves only to demonstrate that the UK Government are focused on boosting the financial services sector while ignoring working people.

As well as work at home, the Scottish Government have been striving to support other countries to achieve the SDGs overseas. It goes without saying that SDG 4, on quality education, is one of the most valuable tools in the fight against global poverty, yet some of the world’s most vulnerable people remain without access to education. The SNP Scottish Government have been working to meet this goal by empowering people in developing nations and giving them the skills and opportunities to improve the lives of themselves and their communities.

We have backed programmes such as the Pakistan scholarship scheme, which has helped to support more than 400 women and more than 1,400 schoolchildren to continue their education. Also, more than 73,000 Malawian children have been helped to stay in school through the Child Poverty Action Group’s “The Cost of the School Day” programme. We have backed such programmes.

As well as work at home, the Scottish Government have been striving to support other countries to achieve the SDGs overseas. It goes without saying that SDG 16, on peace and justice, is one of the UN’s five priority goals this year. As well as welcoming people from developing countries for training, Scotland has taken almost 20% of the UK’s intake of Syrian refugees. The Scottish Government are also playing a role in the Syrian peace process. The SNP has long shown its determination to put women at the heart of government...
and politics. Recognising this, the UN special envoy to Syria invited the First Minister to provide support in training female peacemakers in negotiation and communication skills. Indeed, since its launch, the programme has trained more than 150 female peacemakers from Syria, Libya, Palestine and other conflict zones around the world. These are clear examples of the Scottish Government’s ambitions being met in Scotland and overseas, and I now turn my focus to the UN’s fifth focus goal for 2019, namely SDG 13 on climate action.

Crucially, many of the sustainable development goals will be rendered unachievable, and existing development gains that have been made will be reversed if we do not tackle climate change. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change report of autumn 2018, the UK Committee on Climate Change report of May 2019 and the International Development Committee report of this month all reach the same conclusion: we have too little time to prevent Earth’s temperature from increasing by more than 1.4° without radical solutions and clear political leadership. By way of example, Mongolia and Tibet are already experiencing 2° above pre-industrial levels.

The demonstration by Extinction Rebellion and strikes by young people in our schools serve to focus us on and remind us of how urgent action is needed. There is no doubt that we face a climate emergency. The world will be less safe, resources will be sparse and ecological and demographic crises will be unmanageable. What good is our work on education, inequalities, peace and justice if it is undermined by natural disasters, civil unrest, disease, displacement and mass migration caused by climate change, which pushes 100 million more people into poverty?

I was interested to hear the Secretary of State affirm last week:

“...There should be no distinction at all between the work that we do on international development and the work that we do on climate and the emergency.”—[Official Report, 6 June 2019; Vol. 661, c. 256.]

That is commendable, and I am sure he will look to how the Scottish Government have approached the issue, and have become a world leader in their response to climate change. The Scottish Government have rightly called a climate emergency. Scotland has outperformed the UK as a whole and is one of Europe’s leading countries in cutting greenhouse gas emissions. Our target is to cut those by 90% by 2050, compared with the UK’s target of 80%. Also, a publicly owned, not-for-profit energy company to deliver renewable energy will be established as part of the strategy to reduce emissions.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): It might be worth reflecting—the Secretary of State might be interested in this—that the water company in Scotland is in public ownership, and has managed to achieve at least as much success as the privatised system down south, but with all the benefit being retained for the public purse.

Chris Law: That is absolutely correct. If you look across these islands, Scottish Water covers all of Scotland, which is one third of the landmass of the UK. Most people sometimes imagine Scotland to be a small periphery; it is actually a huge part. Considering the number of water companies across the UK and their different rates and tariffs, and the fact that people have to measure the amount of water they consume to keep their costs down, it really is a great benefit to us that our water in Scotland is nationalised. Furthermore, Scotland’s ban on diesel cars will begin in 2032—eight years ahead of the UK Government’s—and unlike the UK Government, the SNP does not support fracking, or a return to nuclear energy.

In addition to that progress at home, the Scottish Government have distributed £21 million through the world-leading climate justice fund, which is now supporting projects in Malawi, Zambia and Rwanda. Through that, more than 100,000 people have been provided with training on climate change and water rights issues; over 100,000 trees have been planted; and over 200 village-level committees have been established to support water management, to prevent or mitigate the negative impact of climate change.

Let us be in no doubt: tackling climate change is a universal imperative. The UK Government can take lessons from the Scottish Government, and must recognise the imminent impact that climate change will have on international security and humanitarian access to fundamental resources, both at home and abroad.

In a report that I mentioned earlier on UK aid for combating climate change, produced by the International Development Committee, we concluded that climate change must be placed at the centre of each strategy and funding. Our report urged a minimum spend of £1.76 billion annually, and a halt to funding fossil fuel projects in developing countries unless it was possible to demonstrate that they supported transition to zero emissions by 2050.

Disappointingly, we often heard evidence suggesting that Government Departments were not taking climate change seriously, and that there was not joined-up thinking across Whitehall. When I asked the prosperity fund what proportion of its spend supported the use of fossil fuels, I was told that it could not provide that percentage. Similarly, when I asked whether any assessment had been made of the carbon footprint and potential climate impact of its spend, I was told that it did not have specific indicators on carbon footprint. That was surprising and extremely worrying. Unfortunately, that incoherence and lack of focus appears to be common across Government, with policy in one area often undermining delivery in another. Nothing exemplifies that more than the fact that fossil fuels made up 99.4%, as mentioned by the hon. Member for Liverpool, Walton (Dan Carden), and renewables a mere 0.6%, of UK Export Finance’s energy support for low and middle-income countries; those are the countries most likely to be adversely affected by climate change. There is a long-term tie-in to those countries, because once fossil fuel energy supplies are established, they can go on for decades, fundamentally undermining our goal of reducing CO₂ emissions globally.

Between 2013-14 and 2017-18, in low and middle-income countries, UK Export Finance provided £2.360 million-worth of support for exports in the fossil fuel energy sector, and less than £2 million-worth of support for exports in the renewables sector. It is therefore no surprise that this policy incoherence has impacted on the UK’s ability to deliver the sustainable development goals.
In their “Measuring Up” report last year, the UK Stakeholders for Sustainable Development found that out of 143 relevant SDG targets, the UK’s performance was “inadequate” or “poor” on 76% of them. Astonishingly, that is more than three quarters, for those of us of a certain age who work on the pre-decimal. The UK Stakeholders for Sustainable Development has also stated that there is little evidence of tangible progress from Government Departments, or the Prime Minister, or even within the Cabinet.

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): Last night, I watched with horror a programme called “War on Plastic” with Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall. One of the things he said was that although we think we are recycling plastic here in the UK, it is being shipped to developing countries—Malaysia was mentioned because it is the largest recipient. Often, that plastic not only pollutes their water supplies but is then burned, contributing again to CO₂ in the atmosphere. Does my hon. Friend share my concern about the fact that when we think we are doing the right thing and recycling, we are actually causing even more damage? We need to take urgent action on single-use plastics and our relationship with them.

Chris Law: I completely agree with my hon. Friend. The idea that getting rid of little plastic stirrers and straws is really tackling the problems with plastics is farcical. Frankly, it is paying lip service. When China stopped importing plastics in 2015, Malaysia became the biggest importer, but Malaysia is now looking to stop importing plastics so, things need to move fast and radical action needs to be taken. There needs to be a co-ordinated plan from the Government.

Dr Cameron: I thank my hon. Friend for being so generous in giving way. On his point about sustainable development and the use of plastic, I had the opportunity to visit the Copenhagen fashion summit just a couple of weeks ago, and some of the big training-shoe manufacturers are doing innovative work on reclaiming plastics from the sea and making them into training shoes. That is a good idea not only for reaching out to young people but for recycling. Does my hon. Friend think that such ideas should be supported?

Chris Law: I thank my hon. Friend for making that point. She has reminded me of another point: Scotland now has the world’s first company to look into the re-tarmacking of roads without using oil. Recycled plastics will be used instead. In the past couple of weeks, it was announced that a cul-de-sac in a building development was the first road to be surfaced with such material.

It is clear that the UK Government have not developed a focused strategy to address the sustainable development goals seriously and needs to start to deal with these issues with the urgency that they deserve. Although DFID is co-ordinating the voluntary national review, which is commendable, and is also responsible for its overall drafting process, the delivery of specific goals is spread across a variety of Departments. Despite that, the UK Government are failing to communicate the issues with the urgency that they deserve. Although a focused strategy to address the sustainable development was the first road to be surfaced with such material. However, it starts any trade talks.

Going forward, it is expected that the Prime Minister will attend the first four-yearly Heads of State meeting on the sustainable development goals at the UN General Assembly in September. Should that Prime Minister be the current Secretary of State for International Development, I would welcome hearing whatever he is likely to say in September. Of course, as of yet, we have no idea who that Prime Minister will be. Although the Secretary of State understands that we face, in his own words, a climate cataclysm and would like to double the amount that DFID spends on climate and the environment, sadly the same cannot be said of several of the other candidates also vying to become Prime Minister.

One candidate endorsed a report that recommended that the UK should spend 0.7% of its income on aid only if it “gains the freedom to define aid as it sees fit.”
He also said that aid spending should be used in the UK’s “political, commercial and diplomatic interests” and called to change the Department’s purpose from poverty reduction to furthering “the nation’s overall strategic goals.”

Another candidate has spoken of her desire to halve the UK’s overseas aid budget and abandon the UK’s commitment to the UN target of spending 0.7% of national income on aid. When I saw that on “The Andrew Marr Show” on Sunday morning, my chin literally bounced off the kitchen table. Although the Government will cherry-pick their examples of progress on the SDGs in this debate today, it has been evident that their implementation of the sustainable development goals has been shambolic and the future could be bleaker should some in the Conservative party get their way.

In conclusion, I would like to quote Richard Curtis, film writer and director responsible for films such as “Four Weddings and a Funeral”, “Bridget Jones’s Diary”, and “Love Actually”. Importantly, he was in front of the International Development Committee today, because he is also UN advocate for the SDGs and co-founder of Project Everyone and Comic Relief. He summed up precisely what needs to be done by this UK Government when he said:

“The UK is reputed for campaigns such as Live Aid and Band Aid” — those of us in this Chamber who are old enough, which is most of us, will probably remember them— “as well as Make Poverty History, yet what we need is one person who is thinking about this all the time. We need real leadership.”

Whoever becomes Prime Minister next month needs to learn the lessons of the UK’s implementation of the sustainable development goals so far. We are nearly one third of the way from the adoption in 2015 to the target date of 2030. I urge the UK Government to use the VNR to mark the beginning of a more thorough and serious approach to implementing the sustainable development goals—a starting point with proper leadership and proper cross-departmental engagement—and to look at some of the examples that I have mentioned and that have been demonstrated by the Scottish Government.

4.27 pm

Stephen Twigg (Liverpool, West Derby) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to follow three very thoughtful speeches—from the Secretary of State, from the shadow Secretary of State, my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Walton (Dan Carden), who is also my constituency neighbour, and from the SNP spokesperson, the hon. Member for Dundee West (Chris Law), who serves with distinction on the International Development Committee.

The global goals have been a key focus for the Committee since 2015. In June 2016, the Committee published a report on the goals and their implementation at that time, and that was three years ago. We found then that, despite the leading role the UK had played in shaping the goals, progress on working out how to implement them in our own country was disappointing. We concluded that meeting the goals by 2030 would require strong leadership, a coherent implementation plan and, crucially, the engagement of all Government Departments.

We are now conducting a fresh inquiry into UK progress on the goals, in which we have explored DFID’s role as the lead Department, as well as looking at the VNR process. In the evidence that we received, we highlighted the fact that the strong leadership shown by the UK in the creation of the goals has not been sustained since their adoption.

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): We have an upcoming spending review. Surely that spending review should take the 17 sustainable development goals as part of its core mission, as well as net zero emissions, which I have called for previously.

Stephen Twigg: That is a fantastic idea, and I hope the Minister will be able to respond to it when she closes.

Mary Creagh (Wakefield) (Lab): My hon. Friend will know that my Committee—the Environmental Audit Committee—has also been looking at the domestic implementation of the goals. Way back before the general election, we were told that the way of delivering the goals here at home was through the single departmental plans, so does my hon. Friend share my disappointment that only two Departments—DFID and the Treasury—mentioned the SDGs in their plans immediately after the 2017 general election?

Stephen Twigg: I pay tribute to my hon. Friend. Friend for the leadership that she has shown on this issue and the work of her Committee, to which I will return in a moment. She is absolutely right. To be frank, I think the single departmental plans are an insufficient mechanism for delivering the goals anyway, but it is a huge concern if even that is not being achieved.

So far, 111 countries have submitted their voluntary national reviews to the UN. The UK was slow to put itself forward, only committing in November 2017 to present its first VNR, which we will do this year. We have fallen behind other key countries, including Germany, France, Sweden, Canada and Ireland. The Department did not even host its first stakeholder meeting on the VNR until the end of July last year. Departmental champions, described by DFID as “responsible for supporting production of the review”, were not appointed until late October 2018. DFID’s own stakeholder events—the only comprehensive attempts to reach out to different groups as part of the VNR—were very welcome, but they did not start until March this year—just three months ago.

One of the founding principles of the 2030 agenda is “the requirement for all implementation and follow-up processes to be participatory and inclusive”. Stakeholders from civil society, the private sector, Parliament and the general public have a crucial role to play in the VNR process. Indeed, stakeholders have been keen to engage more, particularly UK-based civil society organisations such as UK Stakeholders for Sustainable Development and the Bond SDGs Group, the umbrella for the non-governmental organisations that work in development. Those organisations have been very active, yet they have said that the process has been frustrating. Bond described the consultation as “a missed opportunity”, adding that “the Government has not been clear about specific opportunities for consultation with non-governmental stakeholders”.

[Chris Law]
UKSSD told us that stakeholder engagement has been “limited and selective”.

Mary Creagh: Does my hon. Friend share my concern that the review was not made available in any accessible formats and that the events were often called at very short notice, meaning that disabled people could not attend?

Stephen Twigg: I absolutely share my hon. Friend’s concern, not least when the guiding principle of the goals is to leave no one behind. If we are failing to engage with disabled people and disabled people’s organisations, we are leaving behind a group that has been left behind all too often.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle: At the September high-level political forum, which is the summit, there will be a review of the modalities of the HLPF and the VNR. Does my hon. Friend agree that we could submit this review of the modalities of the HLPF and the VNR…

Stephen Twigg: Although I might express it slightly differently myself, I do share my hon. Friend’s concern. It is incredibly important that we learn from this experience for future VNRs; I will come to that in a moment. We can indeed teach other countries a lesson in how not to go about such a process. As my hon. Friend knows, this issue has been raised in evidence that our Committee has taken not just from DFID, but from other parts of the Government.

It is wholly unsatisfactory that almost four years since the UK signed up to the goals, there appears to be very limited knowledge of them among Whitehall officials outside the Department for International Development. In evidence to the Environmental Audit Committee, Dr Graham Long set out the kind of criteria needed for a good VNR:

“A rigorous assessment of governance for, and implementation of, this...agenda...A focus on those furthest behind in the UK context...Reporting on participation and inclusion in the review...Reporting on awareness-building efforts...Presence of stakeholder perspectives”.

France has been described as exemplary in the way it conducted its review in 2017. It was comprehensive across all goals at home, internationally and in France’s overseas territory. It was self-critical in several sections, with clear next steps, including the notable pledge to establish a national SDG action plan detailing governance for the SDGs and outlining participation in the preparation of the VNR and its future implementation by key stakeholders. We can learn, as a country, from that example.

When the report is presented, as we understand it will be later this week, we as a Committee would like it to make reference to each goal, target and indicator. I welcome the commitment that the Secretary of State made to that when I intervened on him. This must include data on progress so that we get a fully comprehensive picture of the current situation for the whole of the United Kingdom, alongside a rigorous assessment of where we need to go further. Leaving no one behind is at the heart of the goals. It is crucial that the UK’s assessment focuses on the most marginalised groups here in our own country as well as internationally.

As my hon. Friend and neighbour the Member for Liverpool, Walton set out very powerfully, in cities such as Liverpool we have seen the impact of Government policies on poverty and inequality over the past nine years. We know from the Food and Agriculture Organisation that more than 2 million people in the UK are severely food-insecure. We know from the Office for National Statistics what the statistics are showing us about the challenges around poverty and other forms of inequality.

Canada’s VNR focuses from the beginning on vulnerable and marginalised groups in Canada, with a discrete section on leaving no one behind that outlines the main dimensions of inequality and discrimination, with detailed efforts to address vulnerable groups throughout. That is the kind of example from which we could learn lessons in setting out our VNR due to be published this week. It is crucial that there is a national plan for sustainable development. There must also be some kind of co-ordinating mechanism or body with cross-Government reach. For example, Germany has a lead Ministry, with the federal Chancellery at the heart of it, and an advisory council, while France has put in place a representative backed by its Prime Minister. That is what has been lacking in the UK’s approach from the start, since the adoption of the goals in 2015—there has been the void in leadership that we have heard about.

The Secretary of State spoke very powerfully, but we on the International Development Committee have argued that DFID should not be leading on the domestic implementation of the goals, so nor should it be leading on the VNR. I hope that the Government will look again at that. This should be led from the heart of Government, by the Cabinet Office. Governments commonly announce next steps for global goal implementation in their VNRs, including goal and target-specific measures alongside wider reforms. I urge the Government to use their VNR as a catalyst for more effective implementation of the goals.

I will finish with five points for the Minister to address. First, I urge the Government to put in place the structures and lines of accountability that are needed to ensure that the goals are truly prioritised and embedded across Government. Simply putting them into single departmental plans—which is perhaps not even happening, but even if it were—is not enough. I endorse UKSSD’s recommendation that the VNR should include steps towards the creation of a plan or strategy for implementing the goals.

Secondly, the Government need to consult widely to come up with a comprehensive and effective implementation plan setting out how we are going to achieve the goals between now and 2030.

Thirdly, stakeholders need to be engaged in a much more meaningful way. It is very concerning that of the other five countries in the western European and others group presenting this year, we are the only one that does not address stakeholder engagement in our set of main messages. That needs to be addressed between now and next month. One way that could be done—I hope that the Minister will refer to this—is to include stakeholders in the UK’s presentation in New York next month at the HLPF. That has been done by other countries, and I hope that we will do it too.

Fourthly, time needs to be used wisely. The Government should produce a detailed, publicly available timeline as soon as the next review is announced. Finally, I hope
the Minister will say more about how the Government will bring the VNR back home once it is presented next month, including by communicating the goals across Government and into public consciousness. We have an opportunity to capitalise on the momentum of the VNR to galvanise greater engagement with and progress towards the goals in coming years.

Let us learn lessons from some of the weaknesses in this process over recent months and years, so that we can start a deeper and more serious approach to engagement with the goals between now and 2030. With the challenges in our own country around inequality, poverty and food insecurity that we have heard about today, much more needs to be done if we are to meet the goals by 2030.

Germany’s 2016 review committed that country to undertake another VNR in 2021. I hope the Government will make a similarly bold commitment that the UK will undertake a further VNR at an early opportunity.

We can still be proud of the role that the UK played in the millennium development goals and the formation of the global goals in 2015. This VNR provides us with an opportunity to build upon that. In particular, if the Government get this right, the presentation next month could be a springboard for a renewed focus on tackling poverty, tackling inequality and tackling the scourge of climate change both at home and abroad. I look forward to hearing from the Minister how that will be done.

Mary Creagh: I thank my hon. Friend for giving way; she is a valued member of the Environmental Audit Committee, which I have the privilege of chairing. Was she as surprised as I was to discover, during our inquiry, that the UK has the second highest level of severe food insecurity of children under 15, coming second only to Romania in the EU? Does she agree that the roll-out of universal credit, which makes single-parent families up to £50 a week worse off, is a key driver of that food insecurity?

Kerry McCarthy: Yes, I very much agree with my hon. Friend the Chair of the Committee. I would say that since 2010 the Government have absolutely refused to acknowledge that this is a direct result of Government policies. In particular, it is because of the policies of the Department for Work and Pensions that the rise in food bank usage has grown so exponentially. We heard the Chancellor again this week taking a very blasé attitude towards the figures on poverty in this country.

Mary Creagh: Does my hon. Friend not think that there is a poetic irony in the fact that DFID uses the system of cash transfers to give food aid to people abroad, particularly in emergencies, yet it will not make cash transfers to hungry families here at home? It seems to big up the food bank movement—do not get me wrong; it does amazing work—but the most efficient way to feed people is to give them an income so that they may choose how and what they want to feed their own family.

Kerry McCarthy: Exactly. I could not agree more. It is absolutely shocking that so many families in this country are so reliant on food banks and other emergency food provision in this day and age. As the EAC found when we looked into this issue, no Department has included domestic hunger and food security in its single departmental plan. It has very much fallen through the cracks and, as I have said, it is viewed only as an overseas issue. Whether intentionally or not, the Government are giving the distinct impression that they do not want to acknowledge or to tackle the crisis at hand. It was very telling that when we had I think four Ministers from various Departments in front of us for the inquiry—

Mary Creagh: Five.

Kerry McCarthy: The Chair says there were five Ministers. We asked, “Who is responsible for hunger?” and it was not just that there was no one with designated

4.41 pm

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): It is always a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Madam Deputy Speaker.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Stephen Twigg) on giving such a comprehensive overview of the process and the strategy we need for delivering the sustainable development goals both here and abroad. I want to take the opposite approach and focus on a couple of issues where the SDGs could be used as a tool with which to make progress.

The first is SDG 2, on zero hunger. We have tended to see that as an overseas issue, but, as I argued in my intervention, it is a real and growing problem here in the UK and needs a domestic focus as well. The second is plastic pollution and waste, which touches on a number of the sustainable development goals. In that case, it is almost the opposite—we are now alert to, if not on top of, the problems caused by plastic pollution as it affects the UK, but it is also very much an issue for developing countries and the Department for International Development.

SDG 2 was the subject of an inquiry by the Environmental Audit Committee, and I am glad to see a couple of my colleagues from the Committee here. The goal is to end hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition and promote sustainable agriculture via five domestic and three international targets. Last year, UKSSD assessed UK performance against the domestic targets and judged that all were either amber, where

“the UK is not performing well enough or performance is deteriorating”;
or red, where

“there is little or no policy in place that adequately addresses the target, performance is poor.”

This is very much a problem in the UK. I recently held a Westminster Hall debate on the children’s future food inquiry, which showed that the UK has among the worst food insecurity levels in Europe. Nearly one in five under-15s live in a food-insecure household, half of which are severely food-insecure. We heard some terrible stories about children going to school hungry and their education suffering as a result. As many Members across the House have seen in their constituencies, the surge in demand for emergency food aid can be directly linked to the roll-out of universal credit, with its long waiting times, delays in payment and sanctions. The report found that not only the unemployed, but many people in low-paid and/or insecure work are affected by food poverty.

Kerry McCarthy: The Chair says there were five Ministers. We asked, “Who is responsible for hunger?” and it was not just that there was no one with designated
responsibility, but the fact that they all looked so blank and just looked at each other. It had clearly never occurred to them that perhaps somebody ought to be looking at this. That was one of the recommendations of the Environmental Audit Committee—that we appoint a Minister with responsibility for hunger and food security.

I do think there is the broader point, which I have returned to many times in this House, that the F in DEFRA stands for “Food” not “Farming”. We have quite a limited view of food policy in this place. We need to be looking not just at how we produce the food, but how the food gets to people, as well as healthy eating, public procurement, food waste and so many other issues, and hunger is very much part of that. We will do that only by making sure that there is someone with ministerial responsibility across the whole piece.

We also need to look at the issues of malnutrition and childhood obesity, which are part and parcel of the same problem. A recent report by Kellogg’s looked at food deserts in the UK and, absolutely shockingly, two estates in south Bristol—very near to my constituency—came in the top five in the country, and another one in my constituency was also singled out. These are places where childhood obesity will quite often still be a problem, but there is also the overconsumption of cheap, fast food, which is high in calories and low in nutrients. We need a definition of under-nutrition that covers both underweight and overweight individuals, and a tool for identifying it, as called for by the Patients Association.

If we are to leave the EU, British food standards must be maintained. We cannot have a rush to the bottom, whether on animal welfare or food safety standards. This obsession with ever-cheaper food is not the way to solve hunger in this country.

Earlier today, I chaired a session of the all-party group on food waste that was looking at the issue of food waste—surprisingly—with the new food waste champion. Sustainable development goal 12.3 is specifically about reducing food waste. In this country, we have signed up to a target of 50% by 2030, and it is reassuring that the Government are committed to taking action on that. However, it was very disappointing that the Committee on Climate Change, in its recent recommendations to the Government, has suggested only trying to reach that goal by 2050. If we are serious about tackling the carbon footprint of food waste—I am very fond of saying that if food waste was a country, it would be the third highest emitter after the USA and China—may I suggest that we ignore the Committee on Climate Change and stick with what we have promised under SDG 12.3 instead?

The second issue I want to speak about is plastic pollution. I pay tribute to Tearfund for its “No Time to Waste” report, which has already been mentioned. That excellent report shows just how far-reaching and serious the impact of plastic pollution is in developing countries. It is also a problem for us because multinational companies and waste exporters from developed countries are largely responsible for producing plastic in the first place. I have not yet caught the Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall programme from yesterday, but I think it highlighted the fact that we export waste to countries such as Malaysia.

As the Tearfund report mentions, plastic pollution has a direct impact on our efforts to achieve more than half of the sustainable development goals, including those on poverty, hunger and economic growth. It is a threat to biodiversity, on which the production of nutritious food depends. It pollutes our water. Costs associated with ocean-based consumer plastic pollution amount to $13 billion every year. That includes revenue losses to fisheries, aquaculture and marine tourism industries, as well as the cost of cleaning it all up.

Plastic pollution is also relevant to the goal on healthy lives and wellbeing. Plastic causes flooding, and flooding causes the spread of waterborne diseases such as malaria, dengue fever, dysentery and cholera. Burning plastic pollutes the air. I will never forget seeing a screening in Parliament of a film called “Trashed”, which was narrated by Jeremy Irons. It shows kids in the Philippines playing on toxic waste dumps, and we could see the steam coming off the dumps. The mothers were indoors, cooking and using the plastic as fuel. Again, that is incredibly toxic.

Between 400,000 and 1 million people die each year in low and middle-income countries because of diseases related to uncollected waste. There is obviously a problem with water and sanitation for people who live among uncollected waste.

Goal 11, the sustainable cities goal, is also relevant. Globally, 2 billion people lack waste collection, and a further 1 billion people lack safe disposal of waste, let alone recycling facilities, but at the moment only 0.3% of overseas development aid is spent on waste management. I know that the Government are trying to support waste management in developing countries. There tends to be a focus on health and education but not on basic public services. Waste collection in developing countries is crucial if we are to achieve a number of the goals.

Let us consider small island developing states. For example, in the Maldives, one of the islands is effectively designated as the rubbish dump because there is nowhere on the other islands to put the rubbish. The Seychelles are on their second landfill site. There are only three inhabited islands and the main island is pretty much built on a hill and there is little land there. The second landfill site was meant to last 10 years, but it will be full up in six. Where do they send the waste? Tourists who come in on the cruise ships mostly create the waste in the first place. We therefore need to consider how we support other countries to have a waste collection system.

Goal 12 is on sustainable consumption and production. As a Parliament, we should focus more on that. Global plastic production is completely unsustainable and plastics use is growing fastest in countries where there is no prospect of safe disposal. Plastic packaging accounts for nearly half of all plastic waste globally. Of course, that contributes to climate change. Global plastic production emits 400 million tonnes of greenhouse gases each year—more than the UK’s total carbon footprint.

Tearfund highlighted two examples of how the problem is growing in developing countries: what it dubs the “sachet economy”—single portion plastic sachets, which are easier and cheaper to produce and transport than bottles, but are currently non-recyclable, and plastic PET—polyethylene terephthalate. In 2017, global consumption reached 471 billion bottles, which, if they were put in a line, would reach from Earth to Mars.

Goal 14 is about life below water and goal 15 is on life on land. An estimated 8 to 12 million tonnes of plastic enter the oceans every year. That also pollutes our soil and fresh water. As the Tearfund report concludes, we will not meet the sustainable development goals without...
tackling the plastic pollution crisis. We have a time-critical decision to make. We can choose to ignore the evidence and carry on with our linear business model, churning out more and more plastic because it is cheap and convenient. We can continue to fail to invest in circular models and sustainable waste management systems, and ignore the devastation being wreaked across the planet. If we choose this path, and plastic production is allowed to continue to increase in line with predicted growth, it will completely overwhelm even the waste management systems of high-income countries. Communities will continue to be engulfed by mountains of plastic waste, our oceans will continue to fill up with plastic, and people and animals will continue to suffer. Or the global community can act while there is still time. I do not know whether the Minister has had the chance to read the Tearfund report yet, but I hope she does and that she elevates this issue to the position of importance it deserves on her Department’s agenda.

4.55 pm

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): It is a pleasure to be able to catch your eye in this debate, Mr Deputy Speaker, to make a very brief contribution. I was keen to speak, because in 2015, as a newly elected Member of Parliament, the first debate I secured in Westminster Hall was on the sustainable development goals. The Chair of the International Development Committee, the hon. Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Stephen Twigg), remembers it well. It has been interesting to see how progress has been made over the years. I think that I said at the time, and I am happy to say it again today, that we welcome the role played and the leadership shown by the UK Government at that time in driving forward the successor framework to the millennium development goals. There was real leadership from David Cameron and the coalition Government. That Government, of course, also enshrined the 0.7% target into law. It is just disappointing that all the momentum seemed to evaporate as soon as the ink was dry on the agreement, as though that was the work done. That should have been, and still has to have been, the starting point. That has to be the momentum that takes us forward and keeps us making progress.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that it is not just a starting point? There was meant to be a 10-year programme for action on the sustainable consumption and production patterns from 2002 onwards. We have had the millennium development goals from 2000 onwards. This should not be a starting start, but a running start where we are already delivering. That is the great shame about where we are. It feels as though we have done a starting start and that we have meandered around a third of the way through.

Patrick Grady: I absolutely agree. There was a lot of talk about what lessons we could learn from the millennium development goals framework. First, it had to be a continuous, ongoing learning iterative process. It cannot just be about trying to reinvent the wheel every single time. We probably have the most thoughtful ministerial team in DFID since I have been here, but I am just not convinced how long they will last and whether they will have the opportunity to drive the process forward. I will perhaps say a bit more about that before the end.

At the time the sustainable development goals were being developed, we repeatedly made the point that, unlike the MDGs, they would be truly global. We had to have a truly global system for how to tackle the challenges affecting every country in the world, including our own. Not everything in our garden is rosy, as every single speaker, including the Minister, has said. That is the importance of the framework: to hold us to account. We report so we can show where progress is being made and where the gaps still lie. Poverty is unacceptable wherever it is found and we all have to be held to account. If we are genuine about trying to show leadership in this part of the world, it is not just about helping other countries to meet those goals but ensuring we are making every effort to meet them all ourselves and, in terms of accountability, being willing and able to report on them.

On the Scottish Government, Nicola Sturgeon was one of the first Government leaders anywhere in the world to say that her Government would commit fully to the SDGs and play their part in implementing them both at home and abroad. Since the SNP became the Scottish Government in 2007, all their work has been measured against a national performance framework. Since the SDGs have come into force, that framework has been revised so that it is aligned with all the different aspects of the sustainable development goals and that they are reflected in the indicators and the outcomes of that framework. The Scottish Government are showing leadership, and I encourage UK Ministers to look at the framework and the difference it might make across the whole of Government policy.

As other Members have said, the biggest challenge at home and abroad to meeting the sustainable development goals is climate change. Indeed, the changing climate threatens to reverse the progress that has been made over the period of the millennium development goals. I welcome the focus that the new Secretary of State is bringing to the importance of climate change, but tackling climate change and achieving climate justice needs to go beyond, and be additional to, the work that is being done. It is not simply about repurposing some of DFID’s funds and priorities to tackle climate change instead of other things. It has to be both/and; otherwise, we will not make the progress that we need.

That is why I give the example, as did my hon. Friend the Member for Dundee West (Chris Law), of the Scottish Government’s climate justice fund, which is additional to the Scottish Government’s international development fund and is deliberately not handled by the International Development Minister, or at least that was the case when it was set up. It was looked at from a holistic perspective to help people in developing countries to adapt to and mitigate the effects of climate change, because, as others have said, the concept of climate justice recognises that those who are worst affected are often those who are being hit first and hardest but who have done the least to cause the changing climate that we are all experiencing.

The other aspect that is very important is tackling governance and making sure that civil society and national Government frameworks are as strong as they can be. In saying this, I declare a couple of interests: I am the SNP Member on the board of the Westminster Foundation for Democracy and I am chair of the all-party group on Malawi. Malawi has just gone through pretty successful, very peaceful elections, but they have demonstrated some of the challenges that come with governance in
developing democracies. More women have now been elected to the Malawian Parliament, which is fantastic, but as I said to the Secretary of State in DFID questions last week, some of the very capable incumbents found themselves losing their seats. That is democracy—we all put ourselves forward in elections and we have to go into them with open eyes and expect that we may not be re-elected—but there is a tendency throughout developing democracies for one-term elections. People seem to find that once they have been elected, they have real difficulty getting re-elected. We perhaps have to look at some of the structures and causes behind the scenes, when individual candidates seem to get targeted because they are not pliable or are not signing up with the overall majority. The civil society links that help to strengthen that are hugely important as well, so I pay tribute, as the Secretary of State has done, to the work of the Scotland Malawi Partnership.

The civil society grassroots links in Scotland are hugely important. Many of the projects there that have partner and twin organisations in Malawi are just as dedicated to tackling poverty at home in Scotland. Many are church or faith-based groups and they work with poor people in their communities, as well as trying to support people living in poverty in Malawi. When DFID is looking at its options, I hope that it can find different ways to support networks such as the Scotland Malawi Partnership.

Finally, underpinning all that is the 0.7% target, which was calculated at a time when if all the developed countries reached that target, there would be enough money to reach the goals. I do not know when anyone last tried to do that kind of calculation to figure out whether that is still the case, but if everybody did meet the 0.7%, that would leverage far more resources than are currently available for development. It is hugely commendable that there is a cross-party, cross-society consensus in support of that target.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle: Is the hon. Gentleman therefore concerned, as I am, that a number of the prospective Conservative Prime Ministers are talking about slashing it and that the lead candidate is even talking about abolishing the whole Department for International Development? We must say no to that and that we will not let that happen.

Patrick Grady: The hon. Gentleman could have been reading the notes that I have in front of me. He is absolutely right. That might play well to certain parts of their gallery, but it will not play well in the country as a whole. Conservative Members should remember that just before the launch of the very ill-fated Tory manifesto of 2017, there were rumours that the 0.7% would disappear, but that was objected to by civil society, by all the different parties and by their party in Scotland, because there is some semblance of a recognition of that commitment's importance. That is the message that needs to go from this debate. Tying with the target and with DFID being a stand-alone Department may play well with certain Conservative Back Benchers, but it will not play well in the country as a whole. The Conservative party will mess with that at its peril.

5.4 pm

Preet Kaur Gill (Birmingham, Edgbaston) (Lab/Co-op): I am delighted to join the debate and thank all Members who contributed. The hon. Member for Dundee West (Chris Law) made the excellent point that the SDGs should be a comprehensive blueprint for all Departments. He raised the UN special rapporteur’s report on poverty in the UK and stated that the Government are in denial of the facts. He quoted Richard Curtis, who I commend for his work in raising the profile of the SDGs, and gave a clear message that whoever becomes Prime Minister needs to give proper leadership to the SDGs across the Government.

My hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Stephen Twigg), who is the Chair of the International Development Committee, must be commended for the work he has done, particularly on the SDGs. He made an excellent speech in which he spoke of the evidence his Committee has taken, rightly raising a lack of understanding of the SDGs across Whitehall. He made many important points, particularly on how the Government will bring the VNR back home, especially into the public consciousness.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy) focused on a number of SDGs. She cited the work of Tearfund on plastic pollution and the impact it will have on achieving the SDGs. She made the important point that we spend only 0.93% of ODA on waste management in developing countries, which is really a public health concern.

The hon. Member for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady) spoke of the work the Scottish Government are doing on SDGs. He cited Scotland’s partnership work with Malawi, evidencing how civil society can be engaged in delivering the SDGs.

Since I joined the shadow DFID team, I have championed the SDGs at every opportunity. Last year, I went to New York as part of Global Goals Week, and I look forward to returning to New York this year to attend the high-level meetings where the UK’s voluntary national review will be presented. Given that engagement, I was pleased to hear the Leader of the House announce last week that we would have a specific debate on the voluntary national review process. Needless to say, I was somewhat perplexed to see the scope of the debate changed in the Order Paper to remove any reference to the review. It is vital that we take it seriously. We must honour the SDG agenda that we signed up to as a country, and that means applying all 17 goals to both our international and domestic work and being honest about where we can improve.

Let me echo what has already been said in this debate regarding the need for a whole Government approach to achieve the SDGs. On a global level, that means we must have policy coherence so that the actions of one Department do not undermine the work of others. In the UK, local government and local councils matter. We cannot deliver the SDGs domestically without them.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle: Does my hon. Friend agree that, just like in 1992 when after the Earth summit every local council produced a local agenda 21, the Government should be mandating local councils to produce and fulfil local SDGs? I think that councils would be willing to take that opportunity if the call went out from the heart of Government.

Preet Kaur Gill: I thank my hon. Friend for that important contribution, which I fully endorse. I hope that the Government will take that on board.
As I was saying, local government and local councils matter. That is why last year I worked with Birmingham City Council, my local council, to approve a motion on the sustainable development goals, with cross-party support. It was the first council to agree formally to play its part to achieve those important goals. I hope that other councils across the country will follow Birmingham’s lead and adopt their own motions, and I hope the Minister will join me in encouraging Members from across the House to support similar motions in their constituencies.

Will the Minister also agree to speak to colleagues in the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government to ensure that councils and communities across the UK are playing their part? I am concerned about the leadership role that DFID appears to be playing in a programme that should be both global and domestic. DFID is specifically tasked with addressing poverty overseas. Its limited resources should not be diverted to tackling issues in the UK that are the specific responsibility of other Departments.

Those concerns were recently raised by the International Development Committee, which said: “Cross-government engagement with the SDGs—up to this point—has been woefully insufficient. Outside of DFID there is still very limited knowledge of the Goals amongst Whitehall officials.” The Committee went on to say that it was “not convinced that DFID should be leading on the coordination of the VNR”.

I agree with its comments. I should like the entire Government to take the SDGs far more seriously. According to analysis by Saferworld, only three of 76 conflict, stability and security fund programme summaries refer publicly to the 2030 agenda and SDGs as guidance for context analysis or programme direction.

Will the Minister update the House on whether the proposed departmental champions have now all been appointed? Will she clarify what their role will be and what meaningful reporting process they will follow to ensure that the UK does deliver on these important goals? Will she also—all of this is a related question—give concrete assurances that the voluntary national review of the UK’s progress towards achieving the goals domestically will not take any time or resources away from the Department’s international work to eradicate extreme poverty overseas?

I have heard concerns from a number of NGOs and civil society groups that feel that their involvement in the review process has been chaotic, disorganised and last minute. Given that the original deadline for the report’s submission to the UN is this Friday—a deadline that was confirmed in response to one of my recent written questions—civil society groups will be rightly alarmed that they will not have had a proper chance to feed back on the VNR before it is submitted. What are the Government doing to ensure that there is meaningful engagement with those groups? Will the Minister clarify how the input sought from the recent consultations will feed into the final review, and will she give a commitment to seek Government time for a debate following the submission of the VNR, so that we can discuss the content in greater detail?

We cannot afford to fail to meet the SDG targets. The challenges that we face are vast. Across the world, one in nine people still goes hungry, one in five children lives in conflict, 40 million people are displaced from their homes, and the world is facing an ecological breakdown. The world may be at its wealthiest overall, but inequality is at its highest: 26 people now own the same wealth as 50% of all humanity—3.8 billion people.

That is symptomatic of a global economy that is rigged in favour of the few at the expense of the many and a system that accumulates private wealth and power in the hands of a few individuals at the expense of public goods.

As we heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Walton (Dan Carden), the picture in the UK is bleak as well. More and more children live in poor households, and according to the Institute for Fiscal Studies, an unacceptable 7% rise in child poverty is likely between 2015 and 2022.

It is right that we have had time today to debate the UK’s own performance against the sustainable development goals and the voluntary national review. I trust that we will respect the truly universal nature of the SDGs, so that we see a far greater focus on how we achieve them both globally and here in the UK, as that will give us a global blueprint for dignity, peace and prosperity for people and the planet, now and in the future.

5.13 pm

The Minister for Africa (Harriett Baldwin): This has been a short but perfectly formed debate. We have touched the surface of a range of issues relating to the overarching framework that the whole world has signed up to for our journey towards 2030 as a global population. Today’s debate has been a milestone on that journey, enabling us to talk about not only the UK’s voluntary national review, but the journey on which the rest of the world is embarked. I am proud to stand at the Dispatch Box having been in the Government at the time when we enshrined our contribution of 0.7% of gross national income in statute. We are the first and only country in the world to have done that. Members on both sides of the House have expressed support today for the continuation of that approach; they can count on me to continue to support it, as, indeed, the Secretary of State made clear earlier.

This is the first time that we have carried out a voluntary national review. There are, of course, 17 goals. I do not know about the rest of the House, but I personally find that 17 is not exactly a catchy number to work with. I noticed that some Members worked that down to five Ps and others to fewer themes, but I find that 17 is a bit unmanageable. Within those 17 goals there are 169 targets and within that 244 separate indicators. Having worked in the private sector for many years before entering politics, I am a strong believer that it is important to measure these things, because what gets measured gets managed. Interestingly, as a result of this first voluntary national review we found that our independent ONS does not measure absolutely every one of those indicators; in fact only about 72% of those global indicators are already on our national reporting platform. That is the first thing we have learned, along with the importance of data around that. We have therefore decided to add to the data we commission.

We have had an excellent and wide-ranging debate with a range of contributions from the Opposition Benches, including by the hon. Members for Liverpool, Walton (Dan Carden) and for Birmingham, Edgbaston (Preet Kaur Gill), and the hon. Members for Dundee West.
of publication this week. I have mentioned some of the gaps, but in terms of things that we measure, I am sure everyone in the House will welcome the overwhelmingly strong employment growth in the UK. Yet again today, we have seen how strong the job market is, and we have also seen that employment incomes are growing. In fact, the average income in this country is now £507 a week. That is the median income against which the poverty line—60% of the median income—is measured. I am sure the House will also welcome the fact that there has been a disproportionately large increase in employment growth for the poorest 20% of households. These are an important part of the goals. We have seen a seven-point growth in the income of the poorest households. The percentage of people in this country in absolute low income is at an all-time low, and the percentage of children who are in absolute low income after housing costs remains at a historic low. However, hon. Members have pointed out—and we agree—that it is important to note that the goals call for zero poverty and zero hunger, and it will be valuable to see in the voluntary national review where there is still work left to do.

I particularly value the points made about people with disabilities. We have tried to show real leadership internationally on this, but we have also worked hard here domestically to increase the number of people with disabilities in work. There are 700,000 more people with disabilities in work since 2015. There is a lot we can learn from other countries, and the fact that this is happening in an international context with hundreds of other countries representing their insights will enable us to compare and contrast across the world, as the Chairman of the International Development Committee has said.

I fully acknowledge the importance of the world dealing with plastic waste, and the hon. Member for Bristol East will know how much work we have put into some of the pilot programmes internationally. We recognise the importance of the work that is done by a range of organisations including Tearfund, which we work with in Pakistan on waste management, and the importance of our learning from the great examples—the leadership, indeed—in other countries that have been quicker than we have to ban certain types of plastic that are difficult to get out of the food chain.

In summary, as I wait for the speaker who is going to respond to the Adjournment debate, I just want to highlight the fact that this is a journey that we are on as a world. The process of doing a voluntary national review has brought home the importance of measuring these things and the fact that, even with a very well developed and independent Office for National Statistics, we still have some room to improve on our measures. We can all learn from each other as a world, and I look forward to seeing a strong UK delegation at the high-level working group. I value all the inputs from our colleagues across the House in today’s important debate, and we look forward to working with the various Committees of the House as we continue to make progress towards the sustainable development goals for 2030.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved.

That this House has considered the Sustainable Development Goals.
Crime and Antisocial Behaviour: Slade Road, Birmingham

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

5.24 pm

Jack Dromey (Birmingham, Erdington) (Lab): Built in Victorian times, the Frances Road, Mere Road, Kings Road and Victoria Road areas of Stockland Green are over 100 years old. Historically, they were a haven of peace and tranquillity and a strong community—no longer. Twelve months ago, seven residents asked me to meet them in Frances Road. I arrived and 70 were there, and it all poured out. A woman said, “Our great-great-grandparents bought the house, and successive generations have lived in it ever since. Now we fear to walk the streets.” There was a daughter and her mum, and the daughter said, “If ever I want to go down to Slade Road to get a bus, I ask my mum to come with me. I am afraid.” One man who had lived there for 32 years said that gangs, as he called them, who were drugged and drunk had tried to break into his house at 3 o’clock in the morning only the previous week.

The area is still a great community, but it is wracked with crime. The increase is not exclusively due to the rise in the private rented sector, but at the heart of it is a rise to 53% of local homes now being in the private rented sector and rapid growth in the numbers of houses in multiple occupancy and unscrupulous landlords. Registered social landlords are importing vulnerable people into Stockland Green from all over the country, offering supported housing but without the necessary support.

Senior police officers put it well in a recent discussion, saying that they had seen a disproportionate number of vulnerable people and ex-offenders imported into the Slade Road community from all over the country. They also said that rogue landlords often offer a room for £80 and make a lot of money—if they were providing the necessary support, it would cost three times that, but public agencies want to go for the cheapest possible outcome. They said that there are rogues in what sometimes seems like an unregulated marketplace, and that it is harder to get a decent student HMO than to prevent victims of domestic violence from ending up alongside ex-offenders. I do not want to send the wrong message—of course it is right that we accommodate the vulnerable and those on probation having come out of prison, but there has been a disproportionate dumping in Stockland Green without the necessary support to help either group rebuild their lives.

The statistics for rising crime in Stockland Green are stark. Between May 2018 and April 2019, there were 1,179 violent and sexual offences, 480 examples of antisocial behaviour, 380 burglaries, 326 cases of criminal damage and arson, and 277 vehicle crimes, including cars being set on fire. Not all of Stockland Green can be painted with the same brush, but there are hotspots, particularly the Frances Road, Mere Road, Kings Road and Victoria Road areas and the shops further down the hill at the bottom end of the Slade Road.

We now see open drug dealing in the area, and the vulnerable are fearful of walking the streets. I spoke to local residents on last Friday night. Michael said, “My two daughters used to love going to Brookvale Park. We no longer let them out because they just do not feel safe.” His neighbour opposite said, “I have lived here for 29 years. Every morning I come out and see open drug dealing in the street.” I have seen with my own eyes both those who are peddling drugs and clearly mentally ill people on the streets without supervision. I discovered one particular case of an individual who should never have been out other than under supervision, but nevertheless they were free to walk around.

I also see powerful testimony in my own casework. Every week we get an approach from the Slade Road area. For example, a resident on Frances Road wrote to me to say that they have had to put their property on sale because of drugs, people banging on doors at midnight, and the fact that her children do not feel safe to go out of the house. She said, “This started in June 2016, when houses in multiple occupancy sprung up on the street. A lady climbed out of a window and was knocking on the front door at 3 o’clock in the morning. I reported the incident, but the police said they cannot do anything. They sent a PCSO to deal with the issue. Nothing was resolved.” She now cannot even sell the property, because at viewing times next-door residents are smoking drugs at the front door and the smell comes straight into her house.

A second constituent wrote, “There are now many hallway houses on my road. We are really concerned about the drug deals that go on in at least three of the houses. They happen in broad daylight, and we see a lot of drug users coming into the street to buy from drug barons actually living in the street.” She said that residents are intimidated by some of them, and “I have been sitting in my car and watching deals take place as staff are leaving at the same time. They did not bat an eyelid. Most of the old neighbours want to move out now. Another neighbour and I cleaned piles of rubbish from our street recently, as most residents pay no attention if it is spilling into the street, particularly from the HMOs and the rapid growth in the private rented sector. Mice are common in our house now.”

A third resident said, “In my street, and in the street opposite, we had two cars in a matter of weeks set on fire.”

If we go down the hill to the shops in Slade Road, which is the heartland of the Kashmiri community in Stockland Green, we see a similar pattern of open drug dealing and various offences. For instance, one mentally ill man, released without supervision into a second-class HMO in the Slade Road area, came down the hill and assaulted five people, including a grandfather who was seriously hurt, until the police arrived—actually, one of the police officers was assaulted, too.

I pay tribute to our local councillors, particularly Josh Jones and Penny Holbrook, for the work they have done. I also pay tribute to our local police officers Sergeant Jim Reid, Helena and Wayne for the work they do. But as the thin blue line is drawn ever thinner with the loss of 2,100 police officers in the west midlands, their problem in dealing with rapidly rising crime and antisocial behaviour becomes ever more acute. Last week, one resident showed me statistics from the neighbourhood watch arrangements we have now set up, and 83% of crimes recorded in the Slade Road and Stockland Green area do not lead to a conviction or resolution.

I also pay tribute to those in the local authority: Matt Smith, who works on enforcement in the private rented sector; Rob James, the housing director; and Sharon Thompson, the cabinet member. They have taken welcome
action, including a series of prosecutions in recent months at 170 South Road, 118 South Road, 11 The Drive, 472 Slade Road and 30 Huton Road, with more to follow.

Just as the police have suffered the biggest cuts to any police service in the whole of Europe, which is having an impact on our community, the local authority is reeling from the biggest cuts in local government history of £690 million. Those responsible for tackling these problems are doing their very best—I stress that once again—but their numbers have been cut by three quarters.

Both the police and the council can and should do more. Indeed, I want to see the local authority move down the path of selective licensing schemes to tackle the undoubtedly problems in the Slade Road area, and in other areas of Birmingham. When I worked with the then mayor of Newham, I remember seeing at first hand the borough’s imaginative work on a selective licensing scheme and the enormous progress that was made as a consequence in tackling bad landlords. So the police and the council can do more, but the Government must accept that they cannot work miracles. If there is a hopelessly overstretched police service and a badly under-resourced local authority, of course it impacts on their ability to do their job.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this debate. We have raised with the Government on a number of occasions the issue of police numbers and resources. The Government think it is a big deal that they have said, “We will put just under £1 billion into the police service.” At the end of the day, that is not sufficient, because when we look at the police numbers, we see that things have actually got worse. We have three areas of Coventry—parts of Tile Hill, parts of Willenhall and parts of Hillfields—where, although the police do their best, they are under-resourced and we experience some of the problems that my hon. Friend has experienced in relation to bad landlords. They are in the voluntary sector as well, with organisations such as Orbit not carrying out repairs in those areas. That creates a situation that affects people’s health. So I totally support my hon. Friend, because in Coventry, where we have experienced the same thing, the police are doing their best but they are basically firefighting in a difficult situation.

Jack Dromey: My hon. Friend is painting. The details may be different from area to area, but the overall picture is very recognisable. I put it to him that the problem with the overstretch is affecting the police and other services. It is not simply a matter of numbers; it is the fact that the overstretch is preventing them from intervening early, when it is most necessary. It is interrupting the neighbourhood policing that, if successful, heads off problems before they arrive. The mental health services can work effectively only if they intervene early, but the numbers are not there for them to do that. If nothing else, the Government need to address that point, because by restoring some of the budgets they have cut, they will enable those services to intervene in the way they need to—it has to be early intervention.

Jack Dromey: My hon. Friend is absolutely right, because it is about support for the vulnerable on the one hand, but early intervention and prevention on the other hand.

For neighbourhood policing at its best, may I give an unusual example from the Stockland Green area? Six years ago, Sergeant Simon Hensley, now the sergeant in Kingstanding, formed a canoeing club on Brookvale Park Lake. I know, because I was asked to launch it on a rather shaky canoe. Some people asked, “What’s canoeing got to do with the police service?” But he had linked up with the local youth service and some of the local voluntary organisations. It involved at one stage hundreds of local young people, helped to form a good relationship between them and the police, and then, when there was an outbreak of burglaries, young people were coming forward, saying, “We think we know who it is, Simon.” So prevention is critical.

We are doing everything we can in Birmingham, but the Government have a responsibility. The police and crime commissioner for Birmingham will visit Slade Road this Friday to see at first hand what can and should be done next. Resource is key, but resource alone is not enough: we need all agencies with responsibility to come together and act. So, together with the police, the police and crime commissioner and the local authority, I will be convening a summit, at which we want to bring around the table the national health service, the mental health trust, the probation service, the Prison Service and the social housing regulator, which, to be frank, has a lot to answer for in respect of how the powers under the Housing and Regeneration Act 2008 have been used.
to register and deregister bad landlords. It is going to be key to bring them together to get a concerted action plan to make a real difference in Slade Road.

Let me say a couple of things in conclusion. I have referred in particular to the rapid growth in the private rented sector and the problems associated with that in the Slade Road area, but I do not want to demonise all landlords. On the contrary, I want to celebrate the good, because there are many good landlords in the area who feel as strongly as we do about the bad ones. The good landlords include Jackie, who I was with only last week, and also the legendary Birmingham City striker Geoff Horsfield, who owns a number of homes in the Stockland Green area and particularly in Slade Road. If one goes to one of Geoff’s houses, one sees a house in good repair with proper support for vulnerable people, helping them to rebuild their lives. He is the opposite of the bad landlords in the picture I have painted.

As far as the bad landlords are concerned, let me serve this notice: I have referred to certain addresses, but it is my intention, in the next stages, to name and shame the bad, as well as to celebrate the good. We are not going to have people who have bought lucrative homes exploiting the vulnerable miles away, then dumping them, without support, in areas of our constituencies such as the Stockland Green area of Slade Road. Some of those landlords will end up in the dock and, if I have anything to do with it, out of business.

Quite frankly, the great community of Slade Road, whether it is the upper end—the Frances Road area—or down the shops at the bottom, has had enough. On the streets or at a surgery, one sees the pain on people’s faces for the place where they grew up in the houses they loved—that great-great-great-granddaughter telling the story about her own home that she and her family had been proud to live in for in excess of 100 years—and it is a pain that is absolutely heartfelt. It is totally unacceptable that that fine community is suffering in the way it is. That has to end, but for that to happen not only the Government but all parties need to play their part in erasing a stain on the history of a great community.

5.43 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Victoria Atkins): I congratulate the hon. Member for Birmingham, Erdington (Jack Dromey) and thank him for securing this important debate. His constituents can rest assured that their concerns, worries and experiences have been represented eloquently by their Member of Parliament.

We all know from our own constituencies the significant impact that antisocial behaviour and crime more generally can have on people, families and neighbourhoods. What is often so depressing about this antisocial behaviour is that it is carried out by a very small group of people, and they have such a huge impact on a neighbourhood, on a street or, indeed, on Slade Road.

It is that tiny, tiny group of people nationally—a minority of people—whom we have tried to target through the Anti-social Behaviour, Crime and Policing Act 2014, which I will come on to in a little detail in a moment. We are very conscious of the social impact that such behaviour can have. We recognise that there are countless ways of behaving antisocially, and, indeed, the hon. Gentleman has today set out just a few such examples. That is why, in the 2014 Act, we simplified the powers that were in law at the time and introduced six new powers to replace the previous 19 powers. The powers are flexible and are designed to enable local areas to respond quickly to stop the behaviour and prevent it from reoccurring.

We were conscious of the fact that law enforcement is not always the answer. Action by local authorities or local agencies may well be much more effective in targeting a particular group of people or a particular type of behaviour. The powers that came into force in 2015 comprise community protection notices, civil injunctions, criminal behaviour orders, which can be issued by a court in the event of a conviction, public spaces protection orders, a dispersal power and a closure power.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I apologise that I could not be here for the beginning of the Adjournment debate, but I am very aware of what the hon. Member for Birmingham, Erdington (Jack Dromey) said as I was watching the debate on the screen at the meeting I was attending. There are serious problems on Slade Road, but there are also serious problems in other places across the whole of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. My constituency had one of the highest figures for antisocial behaviour. We did a number of things to change that. When the Minister refers to those means of change, I wonder whether she will include local authorities. The antisocial behaviour team at the council specifically tasked officers to do that job, and it worked with the Police Service in Northern Ireland. Church groups and street pastors also got together. Community groups do things with young people as well to take them off the streets and give them something to do. It is also to do with parents. There are five or six things that can be done together, but they can make the change. We did it in Newtownards in Strangford, so it can happen elsewhere.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): I presume that that is to help the people of Slade Road.

Jim Shannon: Absolutely.

Victoria Atkins: It is always a pleasure to welcome the hon. Gentleman’s thoughts into a debate and, indeed, we have discussed antisocial behaviour on a number of occasions recently. As I have always been very keen to point out, if a local area finds a way that works for it, then, of course, that is to be supported. Let me just mention the 2014 Act here. I am sure that the hon. Member for Birmingham, Erdington knows this, but I keep trying to address it when I am in the Chamber, just because the more awareness our constituents have of it, the more—hopefully—they will use the power if they are able to do so. The Act introduced a community trigger and a community remedy, which means that victims of persistent antisocial behaviour can demand a formal case review where a locally defined threshold is met. In the case of a remedy, victims of low-level crime and antisocial behaviour have a say in the punishment of perpetrators who receive an out-of-court punishment.

Jack Dromey: The hon. Lady is absolutely right to say that there is a number of welcome remedies in the 2014 Act. For certain, some of those are already being
used, but we want them to be used to the maximum extent possible in the Slade Road area. Does she not accept that, while first and foremost we get on with the job of doing precisely that, it becomes much more difficult to do so on the scale necessary and as effectively as this serious situation demands if we have an acute resource problem—be it with the police or the local authority.

Victoria Atkins: The hon. Gentleman will know that we rightly debated the reasons for the very difficult decisions that had to be made in 2010, but, as the Prime Minister herself has said, we are now managing the economy so that we can begin to invest more in the services that are so vital in all our constituencies. Indeed, the hon. Gentleman will be pleased that this year we have managed to put forward a settlement that will increase police funding by more than £1 billion in the year 2019-20—with the help of police and crime commissioners, as I am always happy to say—including through the additional £100 million serious violence fund that was recently announced in the spring statement. I will return to that in a moment. I am pleased that the police and crime commissioner has committed to increasing officer numbers by 200 over the next two years, taking full advantage of the police funding settlement that was passed just a few months ago.

The Home Office chairs a national board on antisocial behaviour, which brings together representatives from key agencies to share information and reflect best practice. I hope that that will help individual forces to ensure that they try everything they can to address the ever-changing problems of antisocial behaviour, of which the hon. Gentleman has given some examples.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned houses in multiple occupation, and he did so responsibly in that he made it clear that he was not talking about the whole private rented sector. We have listened to concerns in local communities and the housing sector, and know that a positive and vibrant local private rented sector can be a great thing for a local community. Licensing has been effective in driving improvements in the quality and management of larger houses in multiple occupation. However, there has been an increase in landlords letting out smaller HMOs, which do not require a licence, and there are problems with some of those properties. To address the issue, we have extended mandatory licensing to single and two-storey properties. We have also set national minimum room sizes for sleeping accommodation and a requirement for landlords to comply with local authority refuge schemes, which came into force in autumn last year. Under the Housing Act 2004, larger properties occupied by five or more people forming more than one household require a licence. The hon. Gentleman is organising a summit to bring together housing associations, local authorities and local agencies. I very much hope that that will reassure him that licences are being applied for and are being applied appropriately in his local area.

The hon. Gentleman rightly raised the wider issue of drug use, which of course plays a role not just in lower level antisocial behaviour but in the rise of serious violence. I will come to that in a moment. We are absolutely committed to reducing drug use and the harms it causes—not least because the criminals who supply drugs and exploit vulnerable people are making a profit off the back of those who are addicted to such substances. Although drug misuse is at a similar level to a decade ago, some indicators have been worsening. In part, that is driven by external factors such as an increase in global cocaine production. In response, the Home Secretary has launched an independent review of drugs, led by the eminent Professor Dame Carol Black. The review will look into the ways drugs are fuelling serious violence in the 21st century, and we look forward to its initial report in the summer. There is a strong link between drug use and offending, as 45% of all acquisitive crime is committed by regular heroin, cocaine or crack cocaine-using offenders.

I must touch on serious violence, because all too often in this House we have cause to reflect on the terrible scourge that serious violence is in our local neighbourhoods, streets and communities. We are taking forward a range of actions, with local and regional partners, to tackle serious violence. Last week, my right hon. Friend the Policing Minister and I hosted a briefing to update Members on the Government’s work in this area. We intend to do that regularly because we know that this is a matter of real concern to colleagues across the House. We were pleased to be able to help colleagues to understand some of the work that we are undertaking. In terms of the national picture, the serious violence strategy puts a greater focus on steering young people away from crime while continuing to promote a strong law enforcement response.

We very much believe that the best way to tackle crime is to stop it happening in the first place. That may seem obvious, but removing the incentive for crime means offering young people sustainable life chances and a real alternative to a life of violence. That is why one of the schemes we have announced is the early intervention youth fund totalling £22 million, which is funding 29 projects endorsed by police and crime commissioners. Of that, £2 million has been allocated to the west midlands police and crime commissioner until March next year to help West Midlands police to communicate and disseminate key messages and to target those who are most at risk of serious violence.

We have also invested in a national county lines co-ordination centre, which has seen really significant results in the few months it has been operating. For example, in most recent week of sustained activity, police officers made 856 arrests, engaged with 519 vulnerable adults, and with 364 children for safeguarding purposes, and 46 weapons were seized. We are also supporting a new national police capability to tackle gang-related activity on social media. On the early intervention theme, we have introduced a new £200 million youth endowment fund that will be locked in for 10 years, enabling projects and charities to have much longer funding options available to them.

Jack Dromey: The Minister has referred to some welcome initiatives. However, when it comes to diverting young people from crime, on the one hand there is the point I made earlier about the importance of neighbourhood policing, but on the other hand, how can she square what she is saying with the enormous cuts that there have been to youth services—91% in the West Bromwich area? The impact of that in terms of the capacity of youth services, working with the police and others, to divert young people from crime has been very serious indeed.
Victoria Atkins: I think we all have to recognise that youth services must develop in line with social mores and the modern ways in which we live. Of course, youth services are the responsibility of local authorities, but through programmes such as the troubled families programme there are different ways of reaching different children and families.

As I say, the point of the endowment fund is to lock in this investment so that the money will be targeted at young people who are at risk of serious violence, either as perpetrators or as victims. We believe that it could really produce some very significant results from the range of projects that we imagine it will fund. It focuses particularly on young people aged 10 to 14. But this is just part of our overall programme across Government, including, for example, work by the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, and the other Government Departments I have referred to, as well as the troubled families programme. A range of measures are being conducted to help to impact not just on children’s vulnerability to serious violence but a whole range of other issues.

It is also important that we get the message out that carrying a knife is not normal. We have a campaign called #knifefree, which has been running for some time and has had 6 million views. It sends out the message that it is not normal to carry a knife, that there are alternatives and that help is available if a young person or their carer or parent is worried.

We are conscious of the fact that the summer holidays can, sadly, provide opportunity for criminal activity, so we have arranged for teachers across the country to receive plans for lessons on knife crime and how to avoid carrying a knife, if that is appropriate for their pupils. Again, that will spread the message that it is not normal to carry knives. It will challenge myths and help 11 to 16-year-olds understand the realities of carrying a knife.

Legislation is an important part of the measures to tackle serious violence and antisocial behaviour. The House has just passed the Offensive Weapons Act, to target the sale of knives, corrosive substances and some firearms. We are aware that it cannot be a matter of law enforcement alone. As the hon. Gentleman said, it has to be about working together, with the various agencies taking a collaborative approach. That is why we have run a consultation on a new legal duty to underpin a public health approach to tackling serious violence. We are considering the responses to that consultation very carefully.

I thank the hon. Gentleman for his contribution and other colleagues for their contributions. I hope I have provided some reassurance that the Government are determined to tackle antisocial behaviour and crime, while recognising that this must be led at a local level by not only the police but a whole range of local agencies and authorities, to ensure that the wonderful area he described—not confined to Slade Road; he mentioned many places—remains a happy and safe place to live.

We cannot overstate the importance of people feeling safe from crime on their own streets and in their own communities. We believe that through concerted and collaborative action, we can bring the perpetrators to justice, mitigate the impact on other residents and offer young people a real alternative to a life of crime.

Question put and agreed to.

6.2 pm

House adjourned.
Oral Answers to Questions

WOMEN AND EQUALITIES

The Minister for Women and Equalities was asked—

Welfare Policies

2. Chris Law (Dundee West) (SNP): What recent discussions she has had with the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions on the effect of that Department's welfare policies on women. [911294]

The Minister for Employment (Alok Sharma): The welfare system treats individuals of all genders equally. It provides support and incentives to claimants to enter employment and progress in work. The Department for Work and Pensions and indeed the whole Government are committed to ensuring that all claimants have access to the right tailored support when they need it.

Chris Law: This question is about to completely contradict what has just been said. Under universal credit, lone parents under the age of 25 receive a lower payment than under the legacy system. This is totally arbitrary and discriminates heavily against women, who make up 90% of lone parents. Will the Minister urge the DWP to rethink the policy?

Alok Sharma: As the hon. Gentleman will know, over the last two Budgets, we have put in an extra £6 billion to support the most vulnerable in universal credit. Sadly, he and his colleagues did not vote to support those changes.

Sir David Evennett (Bexleyheath and Crayford) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that ensuring that universal credit is fair and flexible for women is a vital part of supporting women’s economic empowerment?

Alok Sharma: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. In the universal credit system, we have one-to-one support provided by work coaches, and it is working. We have just seen the figures released yesterday by the Office for National Statistics showing that the rate of women in employment is at a record high.

Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): The Minister is also wrong with respect to national insurance contributions being attributed, or rather not attributed, to women who have more than one period of maternity leave within two years. Will he go back to look at the correspondence I have sent to the Department about this very serious problem?

Alok Sharma: Of course I will look at the correspondence and make sure that the appropriate Minister meets the hon. Lady.

Angela Crawley (Lanark and Hamilton East) (SNP): With regards to the DWP’s pensions policy, this Women and Equalities Minister—the fourth—has had the opportunity to reduce the gender pay gap and tackle discrimination against those with disabilities, women and LGBT and BME people before another Prime Minister and another reshuffle. What is she going to achieve in this term?

Alok Sharma: We in the DWP have introduced a range of measures across the whole Government to make sure that we are supporting those across all sectors of society into work. As I said, the hon. Lady just needs to look at the jobs figures: we have joint record high employment, record high women’s employment and record high ethnic minorities in employment.

Hate Crime Action Plan

3. Paul Blomfield (Sheffield Central) (Lab): What discussions she has had with the Home Secretary on the timetable for the publication of the next four-year hate crime action plan. [911296]

The Minister for Women (Victoria Atkins): The current action plan runs from 2016 to 2020 and it was refreshed last year to ensure that it remained fit for purpose. The Government are delivering on these commitments, but we will of course continue to review what needs to be done to tackle hate crime, including what will follow the current action plan.

Paul Blomfield: I thank the Minister for that reply. She will know that, disturbingly, the latest police figures record a 17% increase in hate crime. Does she accept that this is at least in part encouraged by the casual racism of some in public life, and does she agree that anyone who compares Muslim women with “letter boxes” and describes African children as “piccaninnies” is not fit to be Prime Minister?

Victoria Atkins: The hon. Gentleman is quite right to remind us all that our use of language is very, very important in public life. There are many examples across the House, it is fair to say, where, for example, people have liked Facebook pages which they then come to regret. I think there is a particular duty on all of us to ensure that the language we use is respectful, tolerant and reflects 21st-century Britain, which is a vibrant, multicultural, diverse country with much, much talent and potential among all our people.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): Queer bashing is still a fact of life in modern Britain, depressingly, however we have changed the laws, and it is still a fact that young gay boys and girls are six times more likely to take their own lives than their straight counterparts. Does the Minister accept that every time somebody in public life—not necessarily an MP, but in the Church or wherever—spouts language that undermines the fundamental sense of respect that there should be for every different form of
sexual identity in the UK, they increase the poison in the well and that leads to more queer bashing and more suicides?

**Victoria Atkins:** The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to focus on this. Of course, recent events have shown just how despicably some people will behave when confronted with a relationship or situation with which they clearly do not feel comfortable. That is not what our country is about. Our country is a diverse, tolerant, welcoming country, and each and every one of us can play our part in making sure that that message is clear in the way we behave and speak and the words we use.

**Naz Shah** (Bradford West) (Lab): First, can I ask or perhaps suggest that all this whataboutery is parked, because it does not suit this House? Perhaps my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield Central (Paul Blomfield) had access to my question, because I would also like to ask the Minister this. As we are speaking about the hate crime action plan, will she distance herself from people whose comments directly lead to an increase in hate crime, such as her colleague who described gay people as “bumboys”, black people as “piccaninnies” with “watermelon smiles”, and Muslim women as “bank robbers” and “letter boxes”, which, according to the Government’s own funded reporting centre Tell MAMA, led to an increase in attacks on Muslim women?

**Victoria Atkins:** Again, I am genuinely sorry because I am afraid I am not familiar with some of the instances the hon. Lady has just set out. [Interruption.] Really. But the point of the action plan is that it focuses on the five themes of preventing hate crime by challenging prejudicial beliefs and attitudes, responding to hate crime within our communities, increasing the reporting of hate crime, improving support for victims of hate crime and building our understanding of hate crime. Again, each and every one of us in this House and beyond can play our part in tackling the hate and showing that we are a modern, diverse and welcoming country for everyone.

**Census: National Minorities**

4. **Steve Double** (St Austell and Newquay) (Con): What recent discussions she has had with the Minister for the Cabinet Office on ensuring that all UK national minorities are given equal status in the next census.

**Kevin Foster:** Ultimately, as I have just said, the Government will be guided by the ONS’s recommendations, and ultimately the final questions will be decided by this House.

**Mr Gregory Campbell** (East Londonderry) (DUP): Does the Minister agree that while it is important that all recognised national minorities should receive their place in the census, we do need to be very careful that we do not put forward nominations for what are not recognised national minorities and be accused of social engineering?

**Kevin Foster:** When filling in the census, particularly given the fact that we have moved mostly to online filling in, everyone will be able to use either one of the tick boxes or the search and type facility for common responses that people may wish to use. Everyone will be able to fill in in the way they wish and to identify their own identity. As I say, the Government will be guided by the ONS’s recommendations about what should be the suggested ones in the form of tick boxes.

**Bob Blackman** (Harrow East) (Con): I note the Minister’s response about the online versions, but people filling in the paper version, particularly religious minorities, will not be prompted what to fill in—for example, the Jain community. Will he do everything he can to make sure that those from religious communities can fill in their religion?

**Kevin Foster:** I recognise the demands that have been made about a Jain religion tick box, but it is worth noting that the religion question is a voluntary one. Again, there is an opportunity to put in on the paper form what religious identity people have. Most people use that seriously, but as many of us will know, some people decided to declare they were Jedis.

**Female Employment**

5. **Mrs Maria Miller** (Basingstoke) (Con): What steps the Government are taking to increase the rate of female employment.

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Kelly Tolhurst):** The female employment rate of 72% is a record high. The industrial strategy is transforming our economy, ensuring that everyone can access, and progress at, work. We have a range of parental and other leave entitlements, and we are working with businesses to promote flexible working. We will invest £3.5 billion in early education this year, making childcare more accessible.

**Mrs Miller:** We have record numbers of women in work, but more than 50,000 women a year feel they have no choice but to leave their jobs simply because they are pregnant. Will the Minister look carefully at my ten-minute rule Bill, which is a way to try to provide proper protection for pregnant women, so more of them can stay on in work when they are pregnant and continue to work when they have young children?

**Kelly Tolhurst:** I commend my right hon. Friend for her passion, and for her work as Chair of the Select Committee and her ten-minute rule Bill. As she will
know, we recently conducted a consultation on maternity and pregnancy discrimination in the workplace, which finished at the beginning of April. We are currently reviewing more than 600 responses, and we hope to publish the results as soon as possible.

11. [911304] Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): I am very keen on women—[Laughter]—in good jobs, because I have a wife, three daughters and five granddaughters, but may I urge the Minister to pay more attention to getting women into management training? Women indisputably make better managers than men, so let us have more of them training as managers in order to reach the top levels of management in our country.

Kelly Tolhurst: I thank the hon. Gentleman for highlighting that issue. I am proud to be a Minister sitting on the Front Bench among many other females: that just shows that women can do it. One of our priorities has been getting women on boards, and we are on track to reach our target of 33%, but it is crucial that we feed into the pipeline and get women into those executive positions. Hopefully, some of us in the House will be good models for them.

Dame Caroline Spelman (Meriden) (Con): The huge success of the Conservative approach to apprenticeships has enabled many women to secure well-paid jobs in manufacturing. Will my hon. Friend join me in commending the work of companies such as Jaguar Land Rover, which trains equal numbers of men and women as engineering apprentices, despite the challenges that they face?

Kelly Tolhurst: I strongly commend the work of organisations such as JLR. In my constituency, BAE Systems has high-level apprenticeships for women engineers, which is great. We need more women in higher executive roles, and an apprenticeship system is one of the great vehicles that we can use to achieve that.

Ellie Reeves (Lewisham West and Penge) (Lab): As was pointed out by the right hon. Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller), 54,000 women lose their jobs each year because of maternity discrimination. The Women and Equalities Committee has long recommended an increase in the employment tribunal time limit for maternity discrimination claims from three to six months to break down some of the barriers. Why have the Government not implemented that?

Kelly Tolhurst: The hon. Lady will know that the consultation, which finished in April, dealt with that very issue. However, we also sought views on the position of parents who have been on adoption leave or shared parental leave and are returning to work. As I have said, we are looking through the 600 responses to the consultation and are keen to publish the results as soon as possible. Let me emphasise, however, that the law is clear: discrimination against pregnant women coming back from maternity leave is unlawful.

Period Poverty

6. Eddie Hughes (Walsall North) (Con): What steps the Government are taking to tackle period poverty (a) in the UK and (b) overseas. [911299]

The Minister for Women and Equalities (Penny Mordaunt): Let me begin by saying that I hope the whole House will join me in wishing good luck to England and Scotland for their world cup matches this Friday.

We have set up a taskforce, which I co-chair with Plan International and Procter & Gamble. It will improve data and evidence on period poverty, and improve access to period products for all women and girls. Internationally, we have committed the United Kingdom to leading a new campaign of action to end period poverty and shame globally by 2030.

Eddie Hughes: Will the Minister join me in celebrating the great work done by the Red Box project, which is helping me to distribute sanitary products to schools across my constituency?

Penny Mordaunt: I do congratulate Red Box, and also the many organisations throughout the country which Members will know well in their own constituencies. As well as bringing together the manufacturers, the taskforce brings together a network of all those organisations so that we can combat period poverty across the UK.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): The Minister may or may not be aware that Derry City Council is one of the few councils in Northern Ireland that have taken steps to address period poverty among their staff. Has the Minister had an opportunity to discuss these matters with local councils, which have a responsibility to their staff?

Penny Mordaunt: The Departments of Health and Education have initiatives involving schools and colleges and people in hospitals, but there are many other settings in which we need to combat period poverty, and the workplace is just one of them. That is the purpose of the taskforce, and we shall be talking to all employers in the public and private sectors.

State Pension Age: Equalisation

7. Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): What recent discussions she has had with the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions on the effect of the acceleration of the equalisation of the state pension age on women born in the 1950s. [911300]

9. Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): What recent discussions she has had with the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions on the effect of the acceleration of the equalisation of the state pension age on women born in the 1950s. [911302]

13. David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): What recent discussions she has had with the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions on the effect of the acceleration of the equalisation of the state pension age on women born in the 1950s. [911307]

The Minister for Employment (Alok Sharma): The Government of the day decided more than 20 years ago that they were going to make the state pension age the same for men and women in a long overdue move towards gender equality, and this change was clearly
communicated. We need to raise the age at which all of us can draw a state pension so that it remains sustainable now and for future generations.

Martyn Day: We know from House of Commons Library data that the number of women aged 60 claiming out-of-work benefits has increased since 2013 by more than the total number of claimants of all other ages, so what further evidence do we need that this UK Government have totally failed this cohort of women?

Alok Sharma: I am sure the hon. Gentleman will acknowledge that additional money was put into the system—an extra £1.1 billion—which means that women in this cohort will benefit.

Alan Brown: The fact is that 1950s-born women suffered discrimination and lower pay leading to smaller or no private pensions to fall back on, so it beggars belief that they then had to suffer the equalisation of the state pension age. Given the past injustices, the lack of notification of the Pensions Act 1995 and the way the Pensions Act 2011 has been rolled out, who in this Government is going to take responsibility for fair transitional arrangements?

Alok Sharma: As I said, additional money was put into the system, but ultimately this is a question of fairness between generations. We need to make sure that we keep the state pension sustainable, and of course we have to reflect improvements in life expectancy.

David Linden: It will not be lost on those in the Chamber that the Minister has again repeated the myth that these changes were “clearly communicated”. The Work and Pensions Committee said in 2016 that the Department did not live up to expectations and that communication “was very limited”, so can the Minister look us in the eye and genuinely say he thinks he did communicate this to women and did not lead them up the garden path?

Alok Sharma: At the risk of repeating myself, this is a question of making it clear that we have provided extra support, but this is a question of fairness and I know the hon. Gentleman will want to make sure that intergenerational fairness is reflected in these changes.

Women entering Custody

8. Bambos Charalambous (Enfield, Southgate) (Lab): What steps the Government are taking to support women at risk of entering custody. [911301]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Kelly Tolhurst): Last summer, our female offender strategy set out priorities for supporting women at risk of entering the criminal justice system. As part of that strategy, we will be publishing a national concordat shortly, setting out how public services should co-operate to protect these vulnerable women.

Bambos Charalambous: The number of prison officers leaving within a year of starting their role has risen dramatically since 2010, so what are the Government doing to ensure that prisons have experienced staff to assist female prisoners, who often have complex needs, and what steps are the Government taking to support women’s centres, which play a huge role in preventing vulnerable women from entering the criminal justice system?

Paul Maynard: That is two questions for the price of one, which I will seek to answer. As the hon. Gentleman will know, we are recruiting significant numbers of prison officers—over 2,000 more—but also significantly increasing our spending on women’s centres to make sure that every police and crime commissioner area has a centre.

Carolyn Harris (Swansea East) (Lab): As a welcome reform of probation services is ongoing, now is the time to look at how we can improve delivery of these services. Will the Minister commit to looking at making specialist gendered support such as women’s centres, female drug rehabilitation clinics and women’s refuges mandatory as part of the probation services across the country?

Paul Maynard: The hon. Lady makes an important point. We know that women leaving prison have a range of quite distinct needs: they have higher reoffending rates than men, 39% go into unsettled accommodation, and a third are not on out-of-work benefits a month after leaving prison. There is a wide range of issues that we need to look at, and we will take the hon. Lady’s point seriously on board.

Flexible Working

10. Luke Hall (Thornbury and Yate) (Con): What steps the Government are taking to support women to access flexible working. [911303]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Kelly Tolhurst): All employees with 26 weeks of continuous service have the right to request flexible working; that accounts for over 90% of employees. We will consult on creating a duty for employers to consider whether a job can be done flexibly and to make that clear when advertising. We have also established a flexible working taskforce with business groups and employee representatives to promote wider understanding and the implementation of flexible working practices.

Luke Hall: Lots of women working in industries such as retail return from maternity leave to find that they are held back from progressing in their careers because their new caring responsibilities are interpreted as a lack of flexibility. What more can the Government do to challenge this short-sighted behaviour in a minority of employers?

Kelly Tolhurst: I note my hon. Friend’s expertise in the retail sector before being elected to this House. The retail sector gender pay gap is 9.1%, compared with 17.9% overall, but the Government are not complacent and the sector continues to take steps to tackle gender inequality, including through the British Retail Consortium’s “Better Retail Better World”. This has involved more than 30 leading businesses committing to reducing inequality as part of the sector’s contribution to the sustainable development goals.
Workplace Discrimination

12. Shabana Mahmood (Birmingham, Ladywood) (Lab): What steps she is taking to reduce workplace discrimination against people from black and ethnic minority communities.

[911305]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Kelly Tolhurst): The Equality Act 2010 makes it unlawful to discriminate against employees or people seeking work based on race. The Government are committed to a society where everyone can enter work and progress on merit, regardless of their background. That is why the Prime Minister has launched a consultation on mandatory ethnicity pay reporting alongside the new race charter.

Shabana Mahmood: I thank the Minister for her answer, but 35% of black and ethnic minority workers in the west midlands have been encouraged to adopt a western work name by their boss at least once in their career. That is a truly shocking and unacceptable state of affairs in 21st century Britain, so what is the Minister prepared to do to stamp out such discrimination in the workplace for BME workers?

Kelly Tolhurst: The hon. Lady is quite right. Let us be clear that discrimination of any kind in the workplace is not tolerated, and is unlawful in some cases. The Prime Minister has a strong commitment, which is why she introduced the mandatory ethnicity pay reporting consultation. I would also like to highlight to the hon. Lady that the business diversity and inclusion group, which I recently chaired, very much wants to ensure that no one in the workplace will be discriminated against because of their colour or gender.

Topical Questions

T1. [911308] Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): If she will make a statement on her departmental responsibilities.

The Minister for Women and Equalities (Penny Mordaunt): This year’s Pride takes place at a time when LGBT issues are firmly in the public consciousness. It is a reminder, 50 years on from the Stonewall riots in New York, that Pride is just as important today as it was then. Still today, LGBT couples fear holding hands in public. Still today, LGBT people are the victims of prejudice and violence, and still today, some people think it is inappropriate to teach children that other children might have two mums or two dads. I ask all Members of this House to support Pride in the coming weeks and to continue to work towards equality for all.

Martyn Day: Women overwhelmingly bear the brunt of domestic work, spending an average of 10 hours more per week on household work than men. The Office for National Statistics has estimated the value of this work at £1.24 trillion, which is more than the UK’s retail and manufacturing sectors combined. What work is the Department doing to quantify and value this household work?

Penny Mordaunt: The hon. Gentleman makes an important point. We have been working on a women’s economic empowerment strategy, which looks at the responsibilities that women take on at every stage of their lives and at the impact of that on their financial and physical wellbeing. We will publish the strategy very shortly.

T5. [911314] Mrs Pauline Latham (Mid Derbyshire) (Con): What is the Minister doing to help girls to reach their full potential in the light of their being taken from school at this time of the year at or below the age of 16 for early marriage abroad?

The Minister for Women (Victoria Atkins): I thank my hon. Friend for her unrelenting campaign to ensure that this issue is brought before the House. Forced marriage is a terrible form of abuse, and this Government and this Prime Minister have made protecting women and girls from violence and supporting victims of forced marriage a key priority. We have introduced a range of measures to tackle this crime, including creating a specific forced marriage offence and criminalising the breach of forced marriage protection orders.

Dawn Butler (Brent Central) (Lab): Earlier, one of the Ministers said that they were unfamiliar with some of the comments made by the Conservative candidates for the leadership, so I would like to do my public duty. The right hon. Member for Esher and Walton (Dominic Raab) has refused to lift non-disclosure agreements that he has entered into with some women, and he wants to abolish the Government Equalities Office. The right hon. Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson) referred to black people as “piccaninnies” and Muslim women who wear the niqab as “letter boxes” or “bank robbers”. The right hon. Member for Tatton (Ms McVey) says that there is a problem with kids learning about LGBT+ issues. The right hon. Member for South Northamptonshire (Andrea Leadsom) said that having children would make her a better Prime Minister. The right hon. Member for Bromsgrove (Sajid Javid) said that he did not condemn all paedophiles. Finally, the Minister for Women and Equalities’ preferred candidate, the right hon. Member for South West Surrey (Mr Hunt), is going to halve the abortion limit to 12 weeks. In the light of all that, will the Minister confirm whether equalities will progress or regress under the new Prime Minister?

Penny Mordaunt: On the accusations that the hon. Lady makes against my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary, may I gently point out that it was under his tenure that the scheme for Northern Ireland was introduced, funded from England’s NHS budget? I also gently say that the hon. Lady may like to concentrate on her own side’s performance on equalities. The Conservative party has had two female Prime Ministers, and we may have our third in a few weeks, so I encourage the Opposition to get their own act together before casting aspersions on ours.

Helen Whately (Faversham and Mid Kent) (Con): The Government intend to require businesses to consider whether a job can be done flexibly, but will the Minister argue for flipping that question, so that jobs are flexible by default and that employers must make the case for any job not to be flexible?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Kelly Tolhurst): Flexible working is just as important to men as it is to women.
when they seek to strike a balance between family life and a career. I thank my hon. Friend for welcoming our intention to consult on the duty on employers to advertise jobs as flexible, where possible. The Government are not considering making all jobs flexible, but I spoke at the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development’s festival of work this morning, and making flexible working the norm was very much the topic of conversation.

T2. [911310] Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): Despite York being a human rights city, the gender pay gap has increased by a staggering 225% since 2010, with women predominantly in low-paid, part-time and insecure work. How will the Minister invest in adequate numbers of jobs for women in our city?

Penny Mordaunt: There is still a lot more to do on levelling the gender pay gap, and I am delighted to announce today the next round of grants to support women who face significant barriers when returning to work. The Adviza Partnership, the Regular Forces Employment Association, which is the forces employment charity, Mpower People, Westminster City Council, the Shpresa Programme, Beam, and Liverpool City Council are some of the awardees, and they will create opportunities for the most disadvantaged women in our society to achieve their full potential.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): Climate change is not gender neutral and will impact the poorest countries most, exacerbating inequalities. Will the Minister for Women and Equalities join me in congratulating the Prime Minister on ensuring that our country is the first in the world to legislate for net zero?

Penny Mordaunt: This is an incredibly important issue that plays into all the factors that determine whether women and girls around the world are able to reach their full potential. I am extremely proud that our Prime Minister—a female Prime Minister—has been the UN Secretary-General’s resilience champion on climate change and has taken this proposal forward.

T3. [911311] Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): Will the Minister tell us how many women hold senior rank in the UK armed forces and what she intends to do to increase the number of women holding high rank?

Penny Mordaunt: I have committed myself to that cause in ways that previous Defence Secretaries have not by wearing a uniform myself. There has been considerable progress, and I refer the hon. Lady to some statistics that will be published tomorrow that are encouraging in that respect. We now have women on the boards of all three services, and I hope to make some further announcements shortly.

Nigel Huddleston (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): Will the Minister join me in welcoming the fact that the UK was recently announced as one of the best places in the world for female entrepreneurship under the Dell scorecard?

Victoria Atkins: I join my hon. Friend in welcoming the fact that this country is a great place for women, indeed everyone, to do business. This is one of the challenges facing us in our new future outside the European Union and, with women like us in our country, we have a very bright future indeed.

T4. [911313] Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): Women who are in a car crash are 17% more likely to die than men, so will the Department consider a legal requirement on car manufacturers to have female dummies to test their cars?

Penny Mordaunt: The hon. Lady makes an extremely good point, and I will take it up with the relevant Department.

Maggie Throup (Erewash) (Con): What steps is my right hon. Friend taking to support women facing multiple barriers on returning to work after taking time out for caring duties?

Penny Mordaunt: In addition to the returners programme that we have announced today, we have ring-fenced some of that money and an additional £100,000 of funding to particular areas for women who face immense barriers to getting into work or who may have never worked but wish to do so. That includes learning English for those who have not previously had the chance.

Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): The suspects arrested in relation to the vicious and horrific attack on a same-sex couple on a bus in Camden last month are secondary school age children. Does the Secretary of State appreciate the link between sex and relationships education in schools and the prevention of LGBT hate crime? What is she doing to ensure that schools across the country can teach the new curriculum, in line with the law, without fear of intimidation?

Victoria Atkins: I am sure the whole House shares our concern at the recent events we have seen not just in London but in Southampton. As I have said before, we are clear that this is a modern, diverse society, which is precisely why we are introducing sex and relationships education to schools across the country to ensure that our children learn tolerance and understanding.

Mrs Maria Miller (Basingstoke) (Con): Domestic abuse and modern-day slavery are two issues that disproportionately affect women. Will my right hon. Friend join me in thanking the Prime Minister for everything she has done to improve the legislation in this area and to help those women affected by these issues to have better prospects and a better future?

Victoria Atkins: It is my great privilege to agree with my right hon. Friend, whom I thank for all the work she has done recently to scrutinise the draft Domestic Abuse Bill. I thank the Prime Minister for her commitment to women’s issues and to addressing domestic abuse and modern slavery. Only yesterday, I was at an important event at which we discussed the impact of domestic abuse on male victims. People in the room said that they would like me to pass on to the Prime Minister their thanks for everything she has done to put women on the agenda of this country and this Government.
PRIME MINISTER

The Prime Minister was asked—

Employment: West Midlands

Q1. [911278] Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con): What recent discussions she has had with the Mayor of the west midlands on the creation of employment in that region; and if she will make a statement.

The Prime Minister (Mrs Theresa May): Before I answer my hon. Friend’s question, let me say that Friday marks two years since the devastating Grenfell Tower fire. The survivors and bereaved, many of whom lost everything, have endured so much with such dignity. Our highest priority has been to ensure the survivors receive the support they need, and we must learn all we can to make sure no one ever has to go through their experience again.

This week is also Carers Week, which gives us all the opportunity to pay tribute to the enormous contribution that paid and unpaid carers make to our society.

Turning to my hon. Friend’s question, I met the Mayor during my visit to the Kings Norton headquarters of the adi Group, which was an excellent opportunity to see a successful west midlands company doing its part to give young people a career. Yesterday’s job figures show that employment has risen by over 300,000 in the west midlands since 2010, which is something to be celebrated.

I also celebrate my hon. Friend’s birthday today and that of the Mayor of the west midlands, who I believe had a birthday yesterday.

Michael Fabricant: May I associate myself with my right hon. Friend’s earlier comments, if not the birthday greetings, for which I thank her? The west midlands was the first region in the country to launch its industrial strategy, and I think it is the best regional industrial strategy. As this strategy is a shared endeavour between the region and the Government, what further help can she and the Government give to realise its full potential?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to highlight the Government’s industrial strategy and to recognise the shared work that goes into those industrial strategies between government, the region and business. We will be investing £20 million towards this region becoming the UK’s first future mobility zone—that will be introducing new technologies to encourage more seamless and efficient journeys; investing up to £50 million to put the region at the forefront of 5G developments, as the new innovative home to the UK’s first multi-city 5G test bed; and £332 million from the Government’s transforming cities fund to extend the city region’s Metro system. This shared vision for inclusive growth shows how we can reach our potential and do so in a way that benefits all communities.

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Lab): Today would have been the 90th birthday of Anne Frank had she survived, but she died in the Nazi Bergen-Belsen concentration camp in 1945. In her diary, she wrote many things, but one that really applies to all of us at all times is:

“Human greatness does not lie in wealth or power, but in character and goodness.”

We should remember her life and all that she has inspired in so many others ever since the second world war.

Later this week, I will be joining those families and survivors commemorating the second anniversary of the Grenfell fire, in which dozens of people died. As Sunday’s fire in the flats in Barking reminds us, there is still much more to do to ensure that people are safe in their homes in all parts of this country.

As is traditional, I am sure the whole House will join me in welcoming the new Member for Peterborough, my hon. Friend the Member for Peterborough (Lisa Forbes), who is sitting behind me today.

The country is in crisis over Brexit. Manufacturing is in crisis. The Prime Minister’s Government have brought us to this point and now the Conservative party is, once again, in the process of foisting a new Prime Minister on the country without the country having a say through a general election. This Prime Minister created the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy in July 2016. Has the Prime Minister actually delivered an industrial strategy since then?

The Prime Minister: First, may I echo the comments of the right hon. Gentleman in recognising what would have been the 90th birthday of Anne Frank? Nobody can have read the testimony of Anne Frank in her diary without being deeply moved and deeply shocked by what she had to live through, and that is another reason why everybody across this House and across our society should do everything we can in the fight against antisemitism. May I also take this, my first, opportunity to welcome the new hon. Member for Peterborough I (Lisa Forbes) to her seat in this Chamber?

The right hon. Gentleman mentioned the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy and our industrial strategy. It is obvious that he had written his question before he heard the answer I gave to my hon. Friend the Member for Lichfield (Michael Fabricant), which of course referred to not only our national industrial strategy, but our regional industrial strategies, which are making a real difference in creating the record levels of employment we see in this country.

Jeremy Corbyn: The answer the Prime Minister gave has a sort of unreality about it all really. [Interruption.] Let me explain, as I am trying to help Conservative Members. If they could contain their excitement for a moment, I thought I would remind them that the labour force survey shows that compared with 2016, when BEIS was set up, there are now 147,000 fewer people working in manufacturing in Britain, that apprenticeship starts are down 25% and that manufacturing output fell by 3.9% between March and April this year, which is the largest fall for nearly two decades.

In the last year, Jaguar Land Rover, Honda, Vauxhall, Ford and Nissan have all announced UK job losses. Does the Prime Minister think her Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy has been good for that industry?

The Prime Minister: This reveals an awful lot about the right hon. Gentleman’s and the Labour party’s approach to these issues. The point of the industrial strategy is to make sure that we have the economy with the jobs of the future, which is why it is good to see that,
in that industrial strategy, we have key challenges such as artificial intelligence and data, which will underpin the work we are doing in clean growth, mobility, the health service, and so much more.

On Monday, I was pleased to attend London Tech Week, to speak at the event and do a roundtable with tech businesses in this country, to welcome the tech unicorns developed in London and the five tech unicorns developed in Manchester and to welcome the over £1 billion of investment in the tech sector in this country announced at that time. We are looking to the jobs of the future. That is where the high-skilled, high-paid jobs are, and that is what this Government are delivering.

Jeremy Corbyn: Last week, Ford announced it would end production at its Bridgend plant. UK car production has been virtually halved in the last 11 consecutive months. Ford has also said that a no-deal Brexit would put a further 6,000 UK jobs at risk, with thousands more at risk in the supply chain. Nissan, Toyota, BMW and JLR have all made similar statements. Will the Prime Minister take this opportunity to reiterate her Government’s assessment that a no-deal Brexit would be disastrous for Britain? I think some of her colleagues sitting behind her and alongside her need reminding of that.

The Prime Minister: Obviously, the announcement by Ford is very worrying. It is an uncertain time for workers and their families in Bridgend. Ford has committed to supporting employees throughout the consultation process and beyond, including with redeployment opportunities to other Ford sites in the UK. My right hon. Friend the Business Secretary and the Welsh Secretary have spoken to Ford, and we are working closely with them and the Welsh Government—the First Minister of Wales spoke to me as well. We are also working with local stakeholders and trade union representatives to ensure that those skilled and valued workers are supported throughout the process.

The right hon. Gentleman went on to talk about no deal and his concerns about a no-deal situation. It would come a little more sincerely from him if he had not gone through the Lobby regularly and consistently voting to increase the chances of no deal by voting against the deal.

Jeremy Corbyn: The Prime Minister may not have noticed, but her deal was rejected three times by Parliament. Another industry failed by the UK Government is UK steel. Why did the Government not agree a deal to support our steel industry?

The Prime Minister: I think the point the right hon. Gentleman makes is exactly the point I was making. Had he really believed that we should be leaving the European Union and doing so with a deal, he would have voted for the deal. We could have left the European Union and moved into that brighter future already.

We did work with British Steel. We worked with its owner, Greybull Capital, and lenders to explore all the potential options to secure a solution for British Steel. As the emissions trading scheme agreement the Government put in place shows, we were willing to act. We continue to work with the official receiver and with the British Steel support group, which includes management, trade unions, companies in the supply chain and local communities, to pursue every possibility and every possible step to secure the future of the valuable operations at sites in Scunthorpe, Skinningrove and Teesside. I am to meet a group of Members of Parliament from the region whose constituencies are affected later today.

Jeremy Corbyn: Since the Government did nothing to protect the steel industry in Redcar, I hope that they will do a bit better in Scunthorpe, where 5,000 jobs are at risk. The Select Committee on Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy raises questions about whether the Government actually entered into the negotiations in good faith.

Another sector that has been failed by the Government is the renewables industry. Solar installations are down by 94%; onshore wind is coming to a grinding halt; and they have failed to back the very important, very exciting and innovative Swansea bay tidal lagoon. They are failing on cars, on steel and on renewables. I know that the Tory leadership candidates have been falling over themselves to confess to their past indulgences, but can the Prime Minister name an industry that is legal that her Ministers have actually backed?

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Gentleman talks about solar power, but let us look at the facts: 99% of solar power deployed in the UK has been deployed under a Conservative Government, and last year, renewables generated a record amount of electricity. That is indeed a record that this Government can be proud of. While he is talking about renewables, I am very surprised that he has not taken the opportunity to stand up and thank this Government for our announcement today that we will legislate for net zero on emissions by 2050.

Jeremy Corbyn: The legacy of the Prime Minister’s Government is one of failure. They claimed that they would tackle burning injustices; they failed. They told pensioners that their benefits were safe; now, they are taking away free TV licences for the over-75s. They promised action on Grenfell; two years on, there is still flammable cladding on thousands of homes across this country. They promised a northern powerhouse; they failed to deliver it, and every northern newspaper is campaigning for this Government to power up the north. They promised net zero by 2050, yet they have failed on renewables, and are missing—[Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. The right hon. Gentleman will not be shouted down; it is not going to happen. Do not waste your breath. It is not productive, and it is terribly boring.

Jeremy Corbyn: They promised net zero by 2050, yet they have failed on renewables and are missing their climate change targets. They promised an industrial strategy; output is falling. Which does the Prime Minister see as the biggest industrial failure of her Government: the car industry, the steel industry, or the renewables industry? Which is it?

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Gentleman can pose for his YouTube clip as much as he likes, but let us actually look at what this Government have delivered. What we have delivered is a racial disparity audit that deals with the inappropriate inequality of public services
That is the record of Conservatives in government, which we are proud of, and we will never let him destroy it.

Engagements

Q9. [911286] Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): May I congratulate the Prime Minister on introducing legislation for net zero? It is a fantastic achievement, and we can all be proud that we are passing on the planet to our children in a better state. Does she agree that whoever follows her at the Dispatch Box—some of them may be sitting on the Front Bench today—must place policies to achieve that at the heart of their programme for government?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for her words. I am very proud that we are committing to ending that, to ensure that we make our contribution to dealing with climate change, by today laying the legislation for a net zero emissions target by 2050. This puts us on the path to become the first major economy to set a net zero emissions target in law. Once again, this is the United Kingdom leading on the issue of tackling climate change, and delivering on the Conservative promise to leave the environment in a better state for the next generation. This is about long-term climate targets and we are proud of our world-leading record, but I absolutely agree that it is vital to continue this work to ensure that we protect our planet for generations to come.

Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): It is right that today we mark what would have been the 90th birthday of Anne Frank, a young woman who got a diary for her 13th birthday. We should never forget the trials and tribulations of those who paid the utmost price in that genocide and in the genocides that have followed since.

An attack on women’s rights, tax breaks for the rich paid for by raising national insurance in Scotland, closing down Parliament to ensure that a catastrophic no-deal Brexit can be imposed—does the Prime Minister think that any of those policies are respectable, never mind acceptable?

The Prime Minister: The time will come when the right hon. Gentleman will be able to make to encourage other leaders to follow her example?

Q10. [911288] Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): The Prime Minister has led the fight against human trafficking and modern-day slavery, and her Modern Slavery Act has led to 1,700 convictions and convictions of traffickers. However, the scourge of human trafficking continues worldwide. The Prime Minister’s efforts to end human trafficking have been superb. What efforts has she been able to make to encourage other leaders to follow her example?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend. For his question and for the work that he has done over the years on this particular issue. I was pleased to be at the International Labour Organisation conference in Geneva last night to speak about our campaign against modern slavery and to recognise that 90 countries have now signed up to the call for action against modern slavery which I launched in the United Nations. We see other countries following our legislative example—for example, the Dutch Senate recently, Australia, and President Buhari of Nigeria showing great leadership in sub-Saharan Africa on this issue. I am very pleased to see that the impact that the Modern Slavery Act 2015 has had, such that a British citizen has been convicted in British courts for being part of a gang who trafficked Nigerian women to Germany, despite the fact that none of that crime touched the UK. She was a British citizen; she was prosecuted here, thanks to our Modern Slavery Act.

Q11. [911286] Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab): In the event that a Prime Minister asked Her Majesty the Queen to prorogue Parliament against the express wishes of the majority of the House of Commons, whose advice would the Queen be obliged to follow—the advice of her Prime Minister or the express will of this House?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Gentleman knows that I will not stand at this Dispatch Box and speak about decisions that Her Majesty the Queen might make. What I would say is that we see a situation this afternoon, in a motion, where the Labour party and the SNP are trying to take control away from the Government of the business of this House. Governments are able to govern by having control of the business of this House, and that is what everybody should recall.
Q15. [911292] Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): Last week, I had the privilege of meeting my 109-year-old constituent, Mrs May Willis, who is still living independently in Bexhill. She asked me to pass on her sentiments to the Prime Minister—so from one May to another, as it were. She asked me to express how much she admires the Prime Minister’s dedication to public service and everything she has done in putting her country first and regrets that she has been let down by people in this place—sentiments I share. She is concerned about democracy. I know the Prime Minister loathes this concept, as both she and I voted three times for her deal and also to keep no deal on the table, but at what point in time will we need to put this back to the people to finally deliver Brexit?

The Prime Minister: I first ask my hon. Friend to pass on my best wishes and thanks to May for her comments and to congratulate her on a long life and on the interest that she has shown in politics and in what is happening in this country. On the second part of his question, I simply say to him that I have not changed my mind. I believe that we should be working to deliver on the result of the first referendum, where we gave the people the choice and they chose to leave the EU. I continue to believe that we should do that with a deal because I think that is in the best interests of this country.

Q3. [911280] Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): This logjammed and underworked Parliament could become one of the best if we chose to work across the parties to fix our broken social care system. Through free votes, good will and hard work, we could design and then enact a new deal for social care that would bring hope for the future to millions. So in her lifetime will we need to put this back to the people to finally deliver Brexit?

The Prime Minister: We do indeed need to ensure that we can see a sustainable future for our social care system. That is why, at the earliest opportunity, the Government will bring forward a social care Green Paper, and it will be open to all across this House to be able to contribute to the consideration of that.

Stephen Crabb (Preseli Pembrokeshire) (Con): Does the Prime Minister share the growing sense of alarm that women in families with a history of breast cancer are concerned about the potential effects of these extradition arrangements in Hong Kong? Does she further agree that we should do that with a deal because I think that is in the best interests of this country.

The Prime Minister: This is an important issue. We are concerned about the potential effects of these proposals—particularly, obviously, given the large number of British citizens in Hong Kong. It is vital that the extradition arrangements in Hong Kong are in line with the rights and freedoms that were set down in the Sino-British joint declaration. We have been unequivocal in our views. We have been very clear, from the outset, in engaging with the Hong Kong Government and with the members of the Hong Kong Legislative Council and Executive Council—at all levels—about our view on this issue. As I say, it is vital that those extradition arrangements are in line with the rights and freedoms that were set down in the Sino-British joint declaration.

Q4. [911281] Wayne David (Caerphilly) (Lab): The Prime Minister has always said that she believes in fairness, so can I ask her: would it be fair to have a taxation policy that massively benefits the top and richest 10% in our country by introducing tax cuts for them? Does she think that is fair?

The Prime Minister: What I think is fair is what this Government are doing: under this Government, we have seen the top 1% paying more in income tax than they ever did under a Labour Government. What is more, we have been delivering tax cuts, with over 3 million people taken out of paying income tax altogether and over 30 million people with a tax cut. That is what is fair: more money in people’s pockets. That is what we, as Conservatives, have done for people.

Andrew Griffiths (Burton) (Con): The Prime Minister will remember that, just two months ago, I raised the case of Nicola Morgan-Dingley. Nicola was 36, a marathon runner and a fit and healthy woman when she was diagnosed with triple negative breast cancer. Just two weeks ago, she came to see the Health Secretary to talk about what more could be done to help women suffering from breast cancer. Sadly, on Sunday, Nicola lost her battle. Charities such as Breast Cancer Now are demanding that women in families with a history of breast cancer should have access to testing earlier. Will the Prime Minister leave a real legacy by ensuring that those women have the opportunity to beat cancer by accessing testing earlier?

The Prime Minister: May I first extend my deepest condolences to Nicola’s family and friends? The news that my hon. Friend brings to the House is terrible. I am sorry that this has happened, particularly so shortly after Nicola was able to speak with the Health Secretary. I will look at this issue with him. One of the benefits of the 10-year plan that we are putting in place and the cash boost we are giving to the national health service is the ability to put more emphasis on early diagnosis, which is so important. We will certainly want to look at that element.

Q5. [911282] Anna McMorrin (Cardiff North) (Lab): I welcome the Prime Minister’s commitment to net zero, but it does not go far or fast enough. It must include aviation and shipping, and it must not shift our problem over the years. It is important that we give this commitment. I will look at this issue with him. One of the benefits of the 10-year plan that we are putting in place and the cash boost we are giving to the national health service is the ability to put more emphasis on early diagnosis, which is so important. We will certainly want to look at that element.

The Prime Minister: We are taking what will be seen by many as a radical, key step in dealing with this issue. We have been making good progress as a Government over the years. It is important that we give this commitment. We are about 2% of the problem across the world, so it is important that others follow our lead. That is what we will be working to see.

Victoria Prentis (Banbury) (Con): There can be little doubt that this Prime Minister knows what a feminist looks like and I would like to thank her for all she has done to progress equality. Does she agree that there is still a long way to go?
The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for her comments. I agree that there is still a long way to go. That is why we continue to take action. That is why my right hon. Friend the Minister for Women and Equalities continues to look at what more the Government can do to help women in the workplace with their responsibilities, to ensure that women are able to take their full place in our society and that as a country we are able to benefit from the enormous talents that lie in our female population.

Q6. [911283] Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): The Prime Minister knows that I have tracked her impressive career for 22 years, from the June day when I heard her maiden speech. With her integrity, her experience and her moral compass, will she change her mind about cutting and running? This parliamentary democracy is in crisis. Why can she not stay here and even come on the Back Benches and give some of the people who will take over from her a bit of the medicine that they have given her?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Gentleman refers to my staying here. I will indeed be staying in the Chamber of the House of Commons, because I will continue as the Member of Parliament for my constituency. I am a woman of my word. I gave my party my word as to what I would do, and I stand by that. He says that he does not want us to be in this position. I am tempted to say that we would not be in this position if he had voted for the deal.

Sir Oliver Heald (North East Hertfordshire) (Con): In the light of yesterday’s Charity Commission report and today’s report by the Oxfam independent commission, does the Prime Minister agree that there is a role for the Government and other major donors in ensuring and enabling a strong, ethical structure for the whole aid sector, with good governance, so that as well as doing good, these important bodies do no harm?

The Prime Minister: My right hon. and learned Friend has raised a very important issue. The former International Development Secretary, my right hon. Friend the Member for Portsmouth North (Penny Mordaunt), took action immediately when concerns about the actions of non-governmental organisations first became public, and she and the UK have led the way. I know that the current International Development Secretary, my right hon. Friend the Member for Penrith and The Border (Rory Stewart), is looking very closely at the report and at what further action we can take. The action that we as the UK have taken is not just about our interaction with NGOs; we have brought the international community together to look at that issue and we will continue to lead.

Q7. [911284] Karl Turner (Kingston upon Hull East) (Lab): On 16 May last year, the Prime Minister said that she expected a “speedy resolution” to the row between Vertex and NHS England over the cystic fibrosis treatment Orkambi. The Prime Minister is aware of my seven-year-old constituent Oliver Ward, who wrote to her recently. In his letter he pleaded with the Prime Minister:

“Why am I still waiting? I need these medicines...before I get too sick.”

Will the Prime Minister please meet him and his mother Emma to discuss what she can do personally to end this burning injustice, so that Olly and other CF sufferers can live long and healthy lives?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Gentleman has indeed raised this issue with me previously. My thoughts and those, I am sure, of the whole House are with Oliver and his mum, Emma. I understand that my right hon. Friend the Health and Social Care Secretary has in fact this morning written to the hon. Gentleman about the issue. Obviously, we have the process whereby NHS England looks at these issues. I understand that NHS England has made a revised and improved offer to Vertex Pharmaceuticals. Vertex should have heard the concerns and very real case studies that have been raised by Members in this House. I believe that Vertex should now accept the offer that NHS England has put on the table, so that this drug does become available to Oliver and others.

John Stevenson (Carlisle) (Con): Until recently, the probate registry has provided an excellent service, but that is no longer the case. There are extensive delays due to proposed rationalisation, the introduction of new technology and the prospect of increased probate fees. This poor service is causing difficulties to practitioners and distress to families due to the loss of house sales. Will the Prime Minister do everything she can to ensure that the service improves rapidly, and can she confirm that the proposed probate fee increases will now be withdrawn?

The Prime Minister: I recognise the situation described by my hon. Friend and the delays it must be causing for many people dealing with these issues. I will ensure that the relevant Minister looks very carefully at the issue and responds to him.

Q8. [911285] Sir David Crausby (Bolton North East) (Lab): The people of Bolton have suffered years and years of a dreadful train service, made worse by Northern rail and not helped by the Department for Transport. In some respects it is sad to see the Prime Minister stepping down, but as she is going, could she please take the Secretary of State for Transport with her and devolve the running of northern trains to the north?

The Prime Minister: We have been clear—I have said it and the Secretary of State has said it—that performance in the north is and has been unacceptable following the timetable changes on 18 May last year. Passengers in the north deserve better, which is why we are working closely with a variety of organisations, including Network Rail, Northern, TransPennine Express and Transport for the North, to improve services and punctuality. We have also appointed an industry expert, Richard George, to look at the issue, review the performance and make recommendations to improve reliability. That should drive improvements, but we will not hesitate to take the action necessary.

Derek Thomas (St Ives) (Con): When I meet constituents over 75 years old, I see a lifetime of contribution to our economy, society and Great Britain. Can the Prime Minister do anything at all to reverse the decision to take away their free TV licence?
The Prime Minister: I believe that the BBC got a good deal in 2015. Indeed:

“The Government’s decision here to put the cost of the over-75s on us has been more than matched by the deal coming back for the BBC.”

Those are not my words, but the words of the director general of the BBC after the deal in 2015. I think that taxpayers now expect the BBC to do the right thing.

Q10. [911287] Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): In February 2018, a homeless man tragically died outside Parliament. Ten months later, another homeless man died in exactly the same place. Will the Prime Minister deal with that terrible Dickensian situation and, in the dying days of her premiership, address the “burning injustice” of homelessness, whereby we have to step over bodies to enter Parliament?

The Prime Minister: Of course we are all concerned about homelessness and rough sleeping, and when we hear and see the stories that the hon. Lady cited. The latest figures on rough sleeping show that the number of people sleeping on our streets is down for the first time in eight years. That is because action has been taken. It is a step in the right direction, but of course we need to do much more. That is why we have set up the new strategy to end rough sleeping altogether, which is backed by an initial £100 million. We are determined to make sleeping on the streets a thing of the past.

Jack Brereton (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that, for the families who have worked hard all their lives to own their own home, like many people in Stoke-on-Trent South, we must resist Labour’s attempts to threaten their livelihoods with a pernicious land tax?

The Prime Minister: I absolutely agree. Sadly, that is an idea that the Labour party has brought forward in the past. We rejected it wholeheartedly then and we must continue to reject it. As my hon. Friend said, many people in his constituency and others have worked hard to achieve that dream of owning their own home, and we should support them.

Q12. [911289] Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): Many people who responsibly recycle plastic are unaware that supposedly recycled materials are shipped to the developing world, where they are stockpiled or burned. The Prime Minister has talked tough on climate change. Will she now leave a true legacy as an environmental champion and follow Canada’s lead in banning single-use plastic?

The Prime Minister: Actually this Government have taken a lead on single-use plastics. We have been taking action on plastics and I am pleased to say that we are also encouraging other countries around the world. Our alliance with a number of countries in the Commonwealth on this issue is also seeing action being taken. We are particularly concerned for small island states in relation to marine plastic. We will continue the fight against single-use plastic, but this Government have a record to be proud of.

Helen Whately (Faversham and Mid Kent) (Con): Our national health service is brilliant because of the people who work in it. The new people plan recognises that and the importance of investing in training staff and truly valuing them, from the top to the bottom of the NHS. Will my right hon. Friend do all she can to ensure that that is put into practice so that our constituents get the healthcare that they need and want?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to recognise the fact that our NHS depends on the excellent people working within it. I would like to thank all the staff across the NHS for all they do day in, day out. The people plan is a very important opportunity to take action now and in the long-term to meet challenges of supply, reform, culture and leadership and to make the NHS a better place to work. The interim plan sets out several practical steps that the NHS will now take to increase the supply of clinical staff, and the final people plan will be published after the spending review. This is a very important element of the 10-year plan for the NHS and I wholeheartedly support the efforts to improve the NHS as a place to work for its staff.

Q13. [911290] Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): When researchers recently screened all the women prisoners at Drake Hall prison in Staffordshire for brain injuries, they found that nearly two thirds had a serious brain injury before they committed their first offence and that, of those injuries, two thirds were the result of domestic violence. There is a real danger that we are criminalising the victims of domestic abuse. The Domestic Abuse Bill is going through pre-legislative scrutiny at the moment. Would not it be a good idea to change it by adding a clause to provide that all female prisoners will be screened for brain injury, and that all female prisoners who have had a brain injury will have proper neurorehabilitation, so that we can rescue their future and prevent crime? If the Prime Minister has some spare time, will she co-sign that amendment with me, perhaps as vice-chair of the all-party parliamentary group on acquired brain injury?

The Prime Minister: We take the issue of prisoners’ brain injury very seriously and, indeed, action is being taken by the Ministry of Justice to look very carefully into the issue. Obviously, I look forward to the debate that will take place. [Interruption.] Well, I have had many invitations across the Chamber in the past. I have never quite had this invitation from the hon. Gentleman and I have to say, I think I will approach the invitation to work with him with caution given some of the arguments that we have had in the past, but I welcome the fact that I will be able to—or expect to be able to—contribute to the debate on that Bill when it goes through this House. It is a very important piece of legislation, which I want to see genuinely transforming what we can do to deal with domestic violence.

Mr John Baron (Basildon and Billericay) (Con): I recognise that cancer survival rates are at their highest in this country, but it remains an inconvenient truth that we are failing to close the gap with international averages. The last Government estimate suggested that 10,000 lives are being needlessly lost because we are failing to close that gap. I know that my right hon. Friend recognises the importance of early diagnosis, but when she has the discussions with her Health Secretary, will she look at a key recommendation from the all-party group on cancer, and many others in the sector, to put
Q14. [911291] Ian Austin (Dudley North) (Ind): We have ambitious plans for Dudley, with the new technical skills centre to provide technical apprenticeships and university-level skills in industries such as advanced manufacturing, digital technologies, low-carbon industries and autonomous electric vehicles. Before the Prime Minister leaves office, will she accelerate the stronger towns fund and enable us to bring new investment, new industries and good, new, well-paid jobs to the Black Country?

The Prime Minister: I do not know whether the hon. Gentleman will get an opportunity to ask me another question at PMQs over the coming weeks, but I take this opportunity to recognise the significant work that he has done with the Holocaust Educational Trust. As we recognise that this would have been the 90th birthday of Anne Frank, it is very important that we recognise the work that is done by that trust, and his contribution to it.

The hon. Gentleman raised the issue of the stronger towns fund and he is absolutely right. We have a notional allocation of £212 million for the west midlands. I understand that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government met him to discuss the design of the fund when he made a recent visit to Dudley. We intend to publish a policy prospectus on the stronger towns fund before the summer recess, but it is there exactly so that places such as Dudley can harness their unique strengths and grow and prosper.

Sir David Amess (Southend West) (Con): Has my right hon. Friend found time today to look at the ombudsman's report on mental health services in my region, with its worrying criticisms of leadership failures? And I have now been involved in 10 leadership parliamentary elections, so will she reflect on the fact that I will be supporting my colleague who respects the referendum result, makes Southend-on-Sea a city and continues to prioritise mental health services?

The Prime Minister: Ten leadership elections and never a candidate? My hon. Friend has missed his opportunity again. I am sure that all the candidates have heard the point that he made.

I have not had a chance to look at the ombudsman's report. I am concerned—we have seen over the years a number of parts of the NHS where the mental health services have not been delivering what they should be delivering for individuals. It is important, as we have put mental health as a central part of what we want to see developing and improving in the health service, that we look at not only the money that is being put in, but how, at local level, trusts are operating and delivering services.

Mr Speaker: The hon. Gentleman might not have been a candidate so far, but he is scarcely at the midpoint of his parliamentary career, and we know not what awaits us, or him, in the future.

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): On the climate emergency, the Prime Minister will know that I want her to go further and faster, but I congratulate her on facing down the Chancellor by legislating for net zero by 2050. However, if she wants a positive climate legacy, we need deeds, not just words, so there are three things that she could do in the six weeks she has left. Will she cancel the expansion of Heathrow airport? Will she divert the money for more road building into public transport? And will she scrap fracking once and for all? That is the way that she would show us she is serious: will she do it?

The Prime Minister: I said a few weeks ago that I hoped the day would come when the hon. Lady would become the Prime Minister and I would be a candidate! My hon. Friend has missed his opportunity to ask me another question at PMQs over the coming weeks, but I take this opportunity to acknowledge the significant work that he has done with the Holocaust Educational Trust. As we recognise that this would have been the 90th birthday of Anne Frank, it is very important that we recognise the work that is done by that trust, and his contribution to it.

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Mr Speaker: Order. We come now to the statement from the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, Dr Greg Clark. If the right hon. Gentleman wishes to await a quieter and more appropriately respectful audience, I am happy to play ball with a little bit of judicious delay—[Interruption.] And filibustering, as the Chancellor observes, helpfully and I think good-naturedly from a sedentary position.
Net Zero Emissions Target

12.55 pm

The Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Greg Clark): I am very grateful, Mr Speaker, for your permission to give this statement on the proposed legislation I have tabled today to end our country’s contribution to global warming. There are many issues in this House on which we passionately disagree, but there are moments when we can act together to take the long-term decisions that will shape the future of the world that we leave to our children and grandchildren.

Just over a decade ago, I was the shadow Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change when the right hon. Member for Doncaster North (Edward Miliband) secured Royal Assent for the landmark Climate Change Act 2008. I was proud, on behalf of my party, to speak in support of the first law of its kind in the world, setting a legally binding target to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by at least 80% by 2050 relative to 1990 levels. Today, I am proud to stand on the Government side of the House to propose an amendment to that Act that will enable this Parliament to make its own historic commitment to tackling climate change—a commitment that has been made possible by many years of hard work from Members across this House of Commons on both sides, and beyond. I thank in particular Lord Deben for his leadership as chair of the independent Committee on Climate Change, as well as its members and staff, and the hon. Member for Leeds West (Rachel Reeves) and my hon. Friend the Member for Cheltenham (Alex Chalk) for their recent Bills that paved the way for today’s proposed legislation. I also pay tribute to the extraordinary work of my friend and ministerial colleague, the Minister for Energy and Clean Growth.

Today, we can make the United Kingdom the first major economy in the world to commit to ending our contribution to global warming forever. The United Kingdom was the home of the first industrial revolution. Furnaces and mills nestled in English dales, coal mines in the Welsh valleys and shipyards on the Clyde and in Belfast harbour powered the world into the first industrial age. We now stand on the threshold of a new, fourth industrial revolution—one not powered by fossil fuels, but driven by green growth and clean, renewable technologies. Once again, the United Kingdom and all its parts stand ready to lead the way. It is right that economies such as ours, which made use of carbon-intensive technologies to start the first industrial revolution, now blaze a trail in the fourth industrial revolution. Whether it is through our global offshore wind industry, our leadership on green finance, or our unrivalled research base that is leading the charge on electric vehicles, we are showing the economic benefits of how cutting emissions can help to grow our economy.

Through our industrial strategy, the UK is already forging that future, leading the way in the development, manufacture and use of low-carbon technologies. By responding to the grand challenges we have set, including on the future of mobility and clean growth, we are already creating millions of new jobs right across the country. We are showing that there is no false choice between protecting our planet and improving our prosperity: we can and must do both.

Indeed, low-carbon technology and clean energy already contribute more than £44 billion to our economy every year. In 2017, energy-related carbon dioxide emissions in the UK reached their lowest levels since 1888. Last year, we secured more than half of our electricity from low-carbon sources. Just last month, we set a new record for the number of days we have gone without burning any coal since the world’s first public coal power station opened in London in 1882.

We have said that we will completely phase out unabated coal-fired power generation by 2025, ending the harmful impacts to our health and environment for good. Together with Canada, we have launched the Powering Past Coal Alliance, which has now seen 80 national and local governments, businesses and non-governmental organisations join together in a pioneering commitment to phase out unabated coal.

However, if our actions are to be equal to the scale of the threat, nations across the world must strive to go further still, and we in the United Kingdom must continue to fulfil our responsibility to lead the way. That is why, in October, following the latest evidence from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, the Government wrote to the independent Committee on Climate Change to seek its advice on our long-term emissions targets. Just last month, it issued its response, recommending that we legislate for the UK to reach net zero greenhouse gas emissions by 2050, taking into account our emissions from international air travel and shipping. So I am today laying a statutory instrument—in fact, it is already before the House—that will amend the Climate Change Act 2008 with a new, legally binding net zero emissions target by 2050.

Ending our contribution to climate change can be the defining decision of our generation in fulfilling our responsibility to the next, but it will require the effort of a generation to deliver it. I am grateful to all those business leaders, faith leaders, scientists and climate campaigners who have written to the Prime Minister, me and many Members in this House to express support for this landmark proposal. It will require Governments and political parties of all colours to work with all sectors of business and society. We must fully engage young people, too, which is why a new youth steering group, led by the British Youth Council, will be set up to advise the Government—for the first time giving young people directly the chance to shape our future climate policy.

The assessment of the independent Committee on Climate Change is based on the latest climate science. It drives our ability to take action on the international stage, and it considers current consumer trends and developments in technology. The committee has concluded that a net zero 2050 target is feasible and deliverable, and can be met within the exact same cost envelope of 1% to 2% of GDP in 2050 as the 80% target when that was set, such has been the power of innovation in reducing costs.

It is, however, absolutely right that we should look carefully at how such costs are distributed in the longer term, as Professor Dieter Helm recommended in his report to the Government. The Government are also today accepting the recommendation of the Committee on Climate Change that the Treasury lead a review into the costs of decarbonisation. This will consider how to
achieve the transition to net zero in a way that works for households, businesses and the public finances. It will also consider the implications for UK competitiveness.

In fulfilling the scale of the commitment we are making today, we will need technological and logistical changes in the way we use our land, with more emphasis, for example, on carbon sequestration. We will need to redouble our determination to seize the opportunity to support investment in a range of new technologies, including in areas such as carbon capture, usage and storage, and in hydrogen and bioenergy.

However, as the committee also found, the foundations for these step changes are already in place, including in the industrial strategy and the clean growth strategy. Indeed, there is no reason whatever to fear that fulfilling this commitment will do anything to limit our success in the years ahead—quite the reverse. In our industrial strategy, we have backed technology and innovation, including the UK’s biggest ever increase in public investment in research and development.

The International Energy Agency’s report on the UK, published last week, found:

“The United Kingdom has shown real results in terms of boosting investment in renewables, reducing emissions and maintaining energy security”.

By doubling down on innovation in this way, we can expect to reap the benefits as we move forward to meeting this target by 2050.

I believe that by leading the world and harnessing the power of innovative new technologies we can seize the full economic potential of building a competitive, climate-neutral economy, but we do not intend for a moment for this to be simply a unilateral action. If we are to meet the challenge of climate change, we need international partners across the world to step up to this level of ambition. While we retain the ability in the Act to use international carbon credits that contribute to actions in other countries, we want them to take their own actions and we do not intend to use those credits.

We will continue to drive this, including through our bid to host the COP 26 conference. As the IEA report found last week, the UK’s efforts are “an inspiration for many countries who seek to design effective decarbonisation frameworks.”

Just as we have reviewed the 2008 Act in making this amendment today, so we will use the review mechanism contained in the Act, within five years, to confirm that other countries are taking similarly ambitious action, multiplying the effect of the UK’s lead and ensuring that our industries do not face unfair competition.

Finally, I do not believe that this commitment will negatively affect our day-to-day lives. No G20 country has decarbonised its economy as quickly as we have. Today, the UK is cleaner and greener, but no-one can credibly suggest that our lives are worse as a result—quite the reverse. We are richer, in every sense of the word, for being cleaner, for wasting less and for cherishing, not squandering, our common inheritance.

We may account for less than 1% of the world’s population and for about 1% of global carbon emissions, but by making this commitment today we can lead by example. We can be the ambitious global Britain we all want our country to be. We can seize this once-in-a-generation opportunity to tackle one of the greatest threats to humanity, and we can make this a defining, unifying commitment of this otherwise riven and often irresolute Parliament—one that is agreed by all, honoured by all and fulfilled by all.

In the first industrial revolution, we applied the powers of science and innovation to create products and services in which this country came to excel, but which came at a cost to our environment. In this new industrial revolution, we can innovate and lead all over again, creating new markets and earning our way in the world in the decades ahead, but in a way that protects our planet for every generation that follows ours. When history is written, this Parliament can be remembered not only for the times that it disagreed, but for the moment when it forged this most significant agreement of all. I commend this statement to the House.

Mr Speaker: It is very good indeed to see the Minister for Energy and Clean Growth, the right hon. Member for Devizes (Claire Perry), in her place in the Chamber, and we welcome her here.

1.8 pm

Rebecca Long Bailey (Salford and Eccles) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for advance sight of his statement. I echo his thanks, not least to the Committee on Climate Change, and to my right hon. Friend the Member for Doncaster North (Edward Miliband), my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds West (Rachel Reeves) and the hon. Member for Cheltenham (Alex Chalk). I, too, would like to welcome the right hon. Member for Devizes (Claire Perry) back to her place.

I begin by welcoming the statement. The Chancellor of the Exchequer was just wrong, in my view, recently to exaggerate the costs of achieving net zero, and it is good to see the Government listening instead to the experts at the Committee on Climate Change. The Labour party committed to a target of net zero emissions before 2050 at its 2018 conference, and it is welcome to see the Government move in a similar direction.

Now that the Government are prepared to legislate their duty, it is now imperative that they urgently take the strategic decisions necessary. Sadly, at last week’s Prime Minister’s questions, the Minister for the Cabinet Office, referring to the UK’s carbon budgets, said:

“We are not off track”—[Official Report, 5 June 2019; Vol. 661, c. 136]—
in meeting those targets at all. It is, however, a matter of fact, confirmed by the Committee on Climate Change and official BEIS statistics, that the UK is off track to meet its fourth and fifth carbon budgets. It would be helpful if the Secretary of State took this opportunity to correct the record, and to tell the House—if the Government are off track to meet their existing carbon budgets—what immediate strategic decisions he will make to ensure that the public can have confidence in the Government’s ability to meet even more stringent targets. That confidence can certainly be restored, but the Secretary of State must recognise that urgent commitments to investment and new legislation will be needed.

Today’s statement is a welcome first step, but the Secretary of State has already recognised the scale of the task that lies ahead. Since 2015, when the Conservative Government secured a majority, they have systematically dismantled the policy frameworks that were designed to
tackle climate change. They have effectively banned onshore wind, reduced almost all support for solar power, scrapped the zero carbon homes standard, sold off the UK Green Investment Bank, removed support for tidal power, and relentlessly pushed fracking—fracking, of all things! Moreover, there has been a 98% fall in home insulation measures since 2010.

At this point the Secretary of State will mention offshore wind, so let us be clear about that. The Government have committed themselves to bringing 30 GW of offshore wind on stream by 2030—well done—but that is significantly less than the 50 GW that the Labour party has pledged, and dramatically less than the 75 GW that the Committee on Climate Change says we could need by 2050. Greenpeace has described the slow pace at which the Government have made contracts for difference available as “bewildering”, and analysis by Green Alliance has found that the Government are pushing the sector into a boom-and-bust cycle.

I could go on—these policy decisions have put the UK back by years—but, as climate change is still reversible, so is the Government’s track record. I am trusting the Secretary of State today to promise the House that, as one of his lasting legacies, he will turn that record around. I welcome his collegiate tone, because there are many—not least the Committee on Climate Change, the Labour party, other Members of Parliament, numerous industry groups, and energy and climate organisations—who have the ground-breaking ideas that are necessary. The Secretary of State need only reach out to those who are desperate to help him.

Achieving net zero before 2050 is necessary and affordable, and there is no need to rely on international offsets, which—let us be honest—does look like cheating. At this point, may I ask the Secretary of State whether aviation and shipping are excluded from the net zero targets, and if so, why? To achieve net zero, however, we will need huge levels of investment. We will need co-ordinated planning and new laws, and, as with any emergency, we will need significant Government intervention. I do not believe that that is ideological, or even party-political; it is just common sense, and that is why it is at the heart of Labour’s plans for ushering in a green industrial revolution.

I welcome today’s announcement, but I must ask the Secretary of State of State when he will start to act in accordance with it.

**Greg Clark:** I thank the hon. Lady for her welcome. It contained some caveats, but it was there nevertheless, and I am grateful for it.

I think that the hon. Lady should take this opportunity to reinforce the joint determination—which is noted around the world—of parties in this House of Commons to commit themselves to leading the world. We have delivered on that. I do not know whether the hon. Lady has seen this week’s report from the International Energy Agency, but it is something of which she, and all of us, should be proud. The IEA—the world’s foremost body in commenting dispassionately on energy matters—says in its report:

“The United Kingdom has led the way in the transition to a low-carbon economy by taking ambitious climate action at international and national levels.”

That is its headline conclusion. As I said in my statement, it has also commented that the Government’s efforts—and I think we can include the efforts of successive Governments—are “an inspiration for many countries who seek to design effective decarbonisation frameworks.”

This is a moment at which, for all the fractiousness of current debates, I think the House can be proud of the decisions that have been made.

The hon. Lady asked about carbon budgets, which were established by the Climate Change Act. As she will know, for the two carbon budgets that have been met—most recently in 2017—we have achieved surpluses of 1.2% in the first and 4.7% in the second, and we are on track for a surplus of 3.6% in the current one, which will end in 2022. As for the carbon budgets that follow, which run until 2032, at this stage—and we are talking about 15 years or more from now—we are already 90% of the way there.

An important feature of the report from the Committee on Climate Change is its recognition of the astonishing returns from investment in innovation. When the right hon. Member for Doncaster North (Edward Miliband) and I were debating the Climate Change Bill across the Dispatch Boxes—the right hon. Gentleman will remember this—the Opposition came close to defeating the then Government on the question of imposing an emissions performance standard on new coal-fired power stations: we were defeated by just a few votes. The need for such a performance standard is now cast into history, because we have no new coal-fired power stations and we are closing the existing ones. Such is the pace of change. So I am absolutely confident that we will meet the ambition that we have set today.

The hon. Lady mentioned solar power. The Committee on Climate Change has commended the action we have taken through the feed-in tariffs. They were always intended to kick-start the solar industry. The scheme cost £1.2 billion a year, and £30 billion has been spent on supporting the industry. It has been successful, as intended, in bringing prices down. Just as in every other advanced economy, as intended from the outset, it has now closed, but has been replaced by an export guarantee that allows those supplying surplus energy in the market to be paid for it.

Proposals of that kind have been endorsed by commentators around the world. In choosing to make this big increase in research and development, we can be confident that we can maintain and fulfil our ambition not only for the environment, but for the job creation in every part of the country that comes with a consistent and determined act of leadership. I am grateful for the support of the Opposition in that regard.

**Mark Pawsey** (Rugby) (Con): Today’s announcement has been broadly welcomed—by, among others, the Confederation of British Industry—but our energy-intensive industries such as steel, ceramics and cement are currently paying a higher price for energy than is paid in comparable countries. What reassurance can the Secretary of State give such industries that other industrial economies will follow our lead and that the measures that will have to be introduced if we are meet the zero target by 2050 will not place those industries at a competitive disadvantage?
Greg Clark: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point. One of our requirements, which has been recognised by the Committee on Climate Change, is our need to invest in the energy-intensive industries in particular to improve their energy efficiency so that they can compete effectively and also to enable us to capture, store and, in some cases, use the carbon they generate. The commitment to carbon capture, use and storage is one of the steps we must take to meet those ambitions.

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): I thank the Secretary of State for advance sight of his statement. I also welcome the Minister for Energy and Clean Growth, the right hon. Member for Devizes (Clare Perry), back to the Chamber—although she is no longer present—and echo others in thanking the Committee on Climate Change for its work.

We welcome the statement. It is important that we all work together to address this challenge. We especially welcome the intention to follow the Scottish Government by including aviation and shipping in the targets, but why not have the ambition to match the Scottish Government’s emissions plan? In Scotland, the target date for zero net emissions is 2045 rather than 2050, and the carbon-neutral target date is 2040. So let us see if we can step up that ambition.

Even before the actions contained in Scotland’s climate change plan, actual emissions were down 3.3% between 2016 and 2017 and down to nearly half of the emissions levels of 1990. The Secretary of State’s Government must be more ambitious. The Committee on Climate Change said that this is “feasible and deliverable”, as was mentioned in the Secretary of State’s statement. Will he also accept the committee’s recommendation which agrees with the CBI on the National Infrastructure Commission’s call that in the 2020s we really need to push ahead with renewables to meet the 2050 target?

The Secretary of State said that he is taking these actions to “tackle one of the greatest threats to humanity”, yet the Committee on Climate Change, the National Infrastructure Commission and the CBI all say that investment in onshore wind and solar has stalled for political reasons. The CBI has said we should take the politics off the table for onshore wind, so will the Secretary of State drop the Tory ideological opposition to onshore wind?

Finally, there is another choice other than nuclear: carbon capture and storage utilisation. St Fergus near Aberdeen could be operational quickly, by 2023 with the right investment and commitment. At minimum it could capture 5.7 gigatons, equivalent to 150 years-worth of all of Scotland’s 2016 gas emissions, so will the Secretary of State reverse the betrayal over Peterhead and that carbon capture programme being withdrawn and commit to investing in St Fergus, to deliver these benefits, not only for Scotland but for the UK and the rest of the planet?

Greg Clark: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman. He seemed to be welcoming the committee’s report but criticising the Government for not agreeing with its recommendation to set a date of 2045 for Scotland and 2050 for the United Kingdom. That was its clear advice and we are following it. There were particular reasons, such as the greater potential for afforestation in Scotland, why it regarded a 2045 target as appropriate. I hope the hon. Gentleman will not take it amiss when I agree with the first part of what he said—that we should follow the committee’s advice—rather than the second part, which is that we should then disagree with it.

On the points about carbon capture and storage, part of the opportunity and requirement for net zero is that it is possible to take carbon out of the atmosphere, especially from industrial processes, and of course Scotland and its industrial clusters will have an important part to play in that.

The hon. Gentleman mentions the National Infrastructure Commission, and again I welcome his respect for its expert analysis. We support what it says about increasing renewables. I hope that in the same spirit he will support its recommendation that we should have more new nuclear power—something he opposed. I do not want to be excessively partisan on an issue that I know from my discussions with the Scottish Government is a common commitment that we make to maintain and increase our ambition and at the same time create jobs in every part of the UK including Scotland.

Richard Benyon (Newbury) (Con): Yesterday, I was in Washington, where I was reminded that this is a fiercely bipartisan issue there that divides politics, perhaps more than any other. It is something to rejoice in that here there is a very bipartisan view on it. I am very proud that this Government have taken this decision today. They have listened to the scientific evidence and are acting on it, but does my right hon. Friend agree that this is the easy part? We have to carry our population with us as we decarbonise our economy further, change the way we travel, farm and move around, and be a beacon for other countries to do the same.

Greg Clark: I completely agree with my right hon. Friend and pay tribute to him for his leadership both as a Member of this House and a Minister in DEFRA in pursuing this at a national and international level. He is absolutely right that we need to change the way we do things, but the prospects of leaning into technology mean that we can do that in a way that does not make our lives more miserable or more constrained. No one could look back on the last 20 or 30 years and think that, having achieved what we have in terms of emissions reductions, we have done so at the expense of our quality of life. That is the guiding philosophy we should take: we should harness technology to make sure our lives can be better and greener and cleaner in the future.

Edward Milliband (Doncaster North) (Lab): I warmly welcome the Secretary of State’s announcement and join those who have paid tribute to the Minister for Energy and Clean Growth, because this idea had been lying around for a couple of years in the long grass of government and it was she who took it out of that long grass and helped make it happen. I also welcome the five-year review mechanism because we might well need to bring forward the net zero date from 2050; that might not be the original intention of the review mechanism but it may be necessary. May I however ask the Secretary of State to recognise that in its advice the Climate Change Committee said very specifically that as well as setting the target itself, the Government must put in
place the policies to meet the target? That means, as it said, a 2030, not 2040, cut-off date for new petrol and diesel vehicles; a proper decarbonisation plan for our 27 million homes, which we do not have; and an end to the moratorium on onshore wind—a moratorium I believe is now economically illiterate as it is now our cheapest fuel available? Can the Secretary of State assure us that henceforth there will be leadership not just on targets but on action?

**Greg Clark:** I pay tribute to the right hon. Gentleman for his own leadership in this. I think he will recognise that we are not credited simply with leadership in terms of legislation and targets but with achievement. Of the major industrialised countries we are the world leader in decarbonising our economy at the same time as growing that economy. We should be proud of that.

The right hon. Gentleman is quite right: the inclusion of the review mechanism in the Climate Change Act was a prescient one because it has allowed me to write to the committee, which has resulted in the report to which we are responding today. I think five years is a good period in which to see how we and others are doing against that target and whether the pace of implementation is what is required.

The right hon. Gentleman is absolutely right that policies to support that will be required. The essence of good policy is that it should not have unintended consequences. In terms of the automotive sector for example, I and Opposition Members know that car companies need to be able to generate the returns to make the capital investment to install the new capital equipment that is needed to make electric powertrains, for instance, so getting that pace right so that they can have the returns to be able to reinvest is crucial; otherwise, there could be unintended consequences. The right hon. Gentleman talked about homes and wind, and of course all these things make contributions to meeting that target. The action from now on, including in the energy White Paper, is to set out the policy framework that supports our ambitions.

**Sarah Newton (Truro and Falmouth) (Con):** I warmly welcome the Minister’s statement today and his beautifully articulated ambition for the UK. Cornish engineers, scientists and miners were at the forefront of the first industrial revolution, and the Cornwall and Isles of Scilly local enterprise partnership clean growth strategy shows that we want to play a pivotal role in this fourth industrial revolution. Will my right hon. Friend congratulate a team from Cornwall that yesterday won money from the Faraday challenge? Cornish Lithium and Wardell Armstrong came together to make sure we can set a path for extracting lithium from Cornish mines and create a supply chain here in the UK for the batteries we will need to power up this fourth industrial revolution.

**Greg Clark:** I agree with my hon. Friend. Friend and I am grateful for her warm words. She is absolutely right to point out some of the possibilities for Cornwall, including the sources of lithium that will be in demand as we decarbonise and electrify cars and other forms of transportation. There are great opportunities for Cornwall and I know that companies there will be creating new jobs on the back of that prospect.

**Rachel Reeves (Leeds West) (Lab):** May I start by welcoming the statement and the commitment that the Secretary of State and the Minister for Energy and Clean Growth have given to this? May I also say how proud I am to be a Member of a Parliament that continues to lead the way globally in tackling climate change? I am pleasantly surprised that the Bill I presented to Parliament yesterday has been adopted so quickly by the Government. However, I would say to the Secretary of State that if we are going to will the ends, we also need to will the means, and I urge him to go back to the reports from the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee and look again at bringing forward the target date for phasing out petrol and diesel vehicles, getting on with the demonstration projects for carbon capture and storage, improving the energy efficiency of our homes by genuinely ensuring that all new homes are zero carbon, and asking more from our house builders. If we do that, we have a chance of meeting the targets that we are now signing up to.

**Steve Brine (Winchester) (Con):** Today is a fantastic day, and this commitment will be warmly welcomed by my constituents in Winchester and, I hope, by the young people watching in the Gallery who have picked a good time to come in. May I ask my excellent right hon. Friend the Secretary of State, who has spoken so passionately on this, what role he sees local authorities playing in this new zero ambition and what targets we as a Parliament might set them so that they can match their words with action—not on everything, but on things like retrofitting existing housing stock and protecting the natural environment from developers? What targets can we set them?

**Greg Clark:** My hon. Friend answers his own question in giving me some examples. It is important to acknowledge that each place has different challenges and different opportunities. My hon. Friend the Member for Truro and Falmouth (Sarah Newton) talked about the potential for the exploitation of lithium in Cornwall, for example. Every part of the country will have its role to play. One of the areas in which local authorities have a signal role to play is charging for electric vehicles. If people have the confidence to accelerate the take-up of electric vehicles, that will make a big contribution to decarbonising the economy.

**Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab):** I, too, welcome this announcement. This is a significant day on the journey that our country must make towards a zero carbon future, although we recognise that some of the steps we have yet to take will be a little more challenging than the ones we have already taken. May I pick up the point that the Secretary of State just referred to? Part of the green revolution will have to be built on electric vehicles, not least because a third of our remaining
emissions come from transport. We are seeing new electric cars being developed and the range extending, but having talked about responsibility of local authorities, will he explain who is going to pay for the charging infrastructure, particularly in residential areas, as this will be essential if consumers are to have the confidence to buy the cars, which will lead the manufacturers to make more of them?

**Greg Clark:** The right hon. Gentleman makes an excellent point. This is a shared responsibility, and part of the funding that we have made available—more will be needed—is to ensure that both the private and public sectors contribute to establishing a network that is not only available but dependable and also rapid in its ability to charge. That network needs to cover every part of the country—cities as well as rural areas.

**Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con):** The Secretary of State will recall the green deal. Will he ensure, now we have a new target, that we have a commensurately robust plan to incentivise households?

**Greg Clark:** I do recall the green deal, and it is fair to reflect that as we take decisions and adopt policies in this area, not every one of them is going to work in the way that is intended. It is an area in which we are innovating, and my view is that we should innovate in technology as well as in policy. I hope that the House will not be too harsh when innovations are attempted that perhaps do not work out in the way that was predicted. However, my right hon. Friend is right to say that we need to give incentives to individuals as well as companies to participate in this roll-out, and through the clean growth strategy and the forthcoming energy White Paper, he will be able to see more of that in the weeks ahead.

**Mary Creagh (Wakefield) (Lab):** I welcome this historic announcement by the Secretary of State and congratulate him and the Minister of State on this achievement. Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that any transition must be a just transition for the communities that are experiencing this if we are to avoid the social devastation that we saw in coalfield communities such as mine, where the mines were abruptly closed in the 1980s and 1990s with no plan? Given that there is no accompanying policy to today’s announcement, may I suggest that he follow the advice of the Environmental Audit Committee’s report, published on Monday, which is to phase out taxpayer subsidies for fossil fuel exports so that we are not exporting carbon dependency into low and middle-income countries while preaching about our own virtues here at home?

**Greg Clark:** I am grateful to the hon. Lady. The work of her Committee will be important in scrutinising the policies that are set in place to meet our ambitions. I have not seen the report to which she refers, but it will be my bedtime reading this evening.

**Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con):** I very much welcome this announcement. In two weeks’ time, the EYE—eco, young and engaged—project that I founded in 2008 will hold its 11th eco-summit in Worthing, attended by 250 local schoolchildren, to share environmental best practice. Does my right hon. Friend agree that those who most enthusiastically embrace the need to take urgent action on climate change are our youngest citizens? If so, what more can we do to turbo-charge plans to do more in their schools and to lead by example on becoming more carbon neutral by doing more on renewable energy, energy monitoring, understanding food miles and environmentally friendly school transport plans?

**Greg Clark:** I am grateful for the support of my hon. Friend, and, as I said in my statement, we have created a particular role for young people to advise on the policy framework in the knowledge that the consequences of climate change will be felt most particularly by the younger generations. There is a further opportunity. If we succeed, as I hope we will, in hosting the conference of the parties next year, that will provide a big opportunity for young people across the world, and especially in this country, to participate in the deliberations on some of the most important decisions that the world will take. I very much hope we will be able to give that opportunity to young people.

**Several hon. Members rose—**

**Mr Speaker:** Well! There is an embarrassment of riches. The right hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Sir Edward Davey) is of course a former Secretary of State, and he is a Kingston knight, but just today, I am going to call before him a Norfolk knight, Sir Norman Lamb.

**Norman Lamb (North Norfolk) (LD):** Thank you very much indeed, Mr Speaker. I warmly welcome this statement. It is a significant milestone, but does the Secretary of State agree that we now need to significantly increase the sense of urgency, particularly in decarbonising the heating of buildings and transport? We have no incentive at all to increase energy efficiency in the heating of homes other than for the most vulnerable households; we are still waiting for the consultation on building regulations to deliver zero carbon; and the plug-in grant for vehicles has been cut. This surely is not good enough, and we need to increase that sense of urgency.

**Greg Clark:** I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman and I congratulate him on his well-deserved knighthood. I think everyone will recognise the reasons for it—[Interruption.] The hon. Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Angus Brendan MacNeil) will have to wait in line, I fear. The right hon. Gentleman is correct to say that we need to decarbonise all parts of the economy. That means reviewing our policies in every area, and it is important that we should do that. He mentioned the plug-in grant for electric vehicles, and one of the desirable features of policies is that a commitment can be made to kick-start the development of an industry to bring costs down, with the intention of withdrawing that commitment when the market has taken flight. We must not get into a position where we can never propose something without it needing to be there in perpetuity, because that would reduce our overall potential for innovation, which, as he knows from his work as Chair of the Select Committee on Science and Technology, would not be good for the UK or for science and innovation.
James Gray (North Wiltshire) (Con): Anyone who truly cares about passing on a cleaner, greener, better globe to our children and grandchildren will warmly welcome the content of today’s statement and will be glad that the whole House has risen above party-political bickering to do just that. The Secretary of State mentioned the manufacturing of electric cars, so will he congratulate Dyson in my constituency on investing £250 million in research and development at Hullavington in my constituency? Will he seek to try to persuade Dyson to make good use of vacated automotive manufacturing facilities nearby, perhaps by manufacturing vehicles at the Honda site in Swindon?

Greg Clark: I agree with my hon. Friend, and I congratulate and praise Sir James Dyson. He is one of our most brilliant inventors and entrepreneurs, and he makes a big contribution to our country, not only through the people he employs, but in the education training that he gives. I share my hon. Friend’s ambition for us to be able to attract Dyson to locate manufacturing facilities in the United Kingdom. We have the research, the brains, the skilled workforce and the facilities, I hope, in time, that we will be able to celebrate further opportunities that Dyson may have in the United Kingdom.

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): I welcome this report, but I would welcome it a lot more if the Government had followed all the recommendations of the Committee on Climate Change, not just the ones that do not cause ideological indigestion. In particular, the committee recommended that the emission reduction effort needs to be done here at home, not outsourced to poorer countries. Carbon offsetting basically slows decarbonisation, and it deprives poorer countries of the low-hanging fruit that they need to meet their own reduction targets. Will the Secretary of State therefore review the decision to rely on dodgy loopholes, and will he ensure that the domestic action is all done here at home?

Greg Clark: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for welcoming the commitment, but she knows that the Climate Change Act 2008 includes the use of credits. The Committee on Climate Change has not recommended that we should repeal that part of the Act, just that we should not aim to make use of them. We support, accept and agree with that recommendation, so we will not be making use of credits.

Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): The Crawley-headquartered Virgin Atlantic had its first biofuel flight last year, and the Gatwick-based easyJet is now flying the new A320neo, which has a much-reduced carbon output. In moving towards net zero emissions, what support can the Government give to the world-leading UK aviation industry, so that it can play its part in ensuring that we can be an island trading nation while leading the world on environmental protection?

Greg Clark: The aerospace sector deal that was concluded as part of our industrial strategy includes the research and development of electric power for aeroplanes, which positions us at the forefront of the development of that technology. That has the obvious benefits of contributing to the reduction in omissions and creating further success for what my hon. Friend correctly describes as an important and successful industry in this country.

Liz Kendall (Leicester West) (Lab): The UK is making good progress on clean electricity thanks to policies introduced by successive Governments, but we are not yet making the progress we need in the need to reduce greenhouse gas emissions from transport. What does the Secretary of State think the key problems and challenges are, and what we are going to do about them?

Greg Clark: If the hon. Lady reflects on the progress that is being made, she will see that the accelerating take-up of electric vehicles makes a major contribution. Through the industrial strategy, we have funded the research and development of new electric powertrains for commercial vehicles—vans, lorries and agricultural vehicles—which will be important. We need to double down on that commitment, but we made the right strategic judgment three years ago when we targeted the future of mobility, including electric vehicles, as being one of the principal contributors not just to tackling climate change, but to creating jobs in the economy.

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): I congratulate the Secretary of State on this important announcement. As he says, the challenge is now all about implementation. May I therefore encourage him to look closely at the Marine Energy Council’s proposals for how to stimulate the production of that side of green energy, which is still the Cinderella of the sector? In addition, may I ask him to work closely with the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs to reduce the amount of illegal plastic waste currently being exported in a disgraceful way to Malaysia and elsewhere in south-east Asia, which will, if not stopped, damage our strong environmental commitments?

Greg Clark: I agree with my hon. Friend and recognise his long-standing campaigning and his contribution to creating a clean environment. In the quest to pursue the possibilities of new technologies and their research and development, I agree that marine and tidal technologies have an important role to play. Since 2010, we have made available over £90 million in grant funding, and we will continue not only to do that but, working with our universities and businesses, to accelerate the research and development that is taking place in all parts of the United Kingdom.

Sir Edward Davey (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD): In wholeheartedly welcoming this statement, may I ask the Secretary of State to do two things? First, will he reverse the Government’s decisions to abolish the zero-carbon homes regulations, to ban onshore wind and to proceed with a third runway at Heathrow? Secondly, will he agree to meet me to discuss how we can decarbonise capitalism, particularly in the City of London? Given that the City funds 15% of global fossil fuel investment, if we can decarbonise the City, that can have a massive impact on the whole world.

Greg Clark: I acknowledge the right hon. Gentleman’s experience and contribution to the cross-party efforts that have been made in this area. When it comes to wind, we sometimes have to make some strategic calls, and the decision we took to provide funding and incentives for the development of the offshore wind industry has allowed it to develop to the extent that we are now the
world leader, creating jobs right across the country, so it
was right to champion offshore wind. He also mentions
the City, and it is important to recognise the contribution
and the leadership that the green finance expertise in
the City of London offers to the world. The City will be
extremely important in financing many of the investments
that will be needed in the years ahead.

Crispin Blunt (Reigate) (Con): I note that this statement
marks 30 years of global British leadership on this
issue, under both parties. Margaret Thatcher was the
first P5 leader to devote the entirety of her speech to the
United Nations General Assembly to this issue. Turning
to the cost estimates, does the 2% envelope include the
likely benefits that will come from the technology that
will be generated from investment in this area? On the
flipside of that, if British leadership fails to take the rest
of the world with us, what kind of estimates have been
made of the costs of protecting our country from the
consequences of climate change?

Greg Clark: My hon. Friend makes an excellent
point. Mrs Thatcher was the first world leader to declare
a climate emergency. I recently reread the speech that
she made to the UN, and I would commend it to any
Member of this House. Its prescience and rigour are
remarkable, and it bears reading again today.

The 1% to 2% cost estimate of the Committee on
Climate Change is exactly what the House voted for in
2008. It is a gross figure, not a net figure, and does not
include the benefits. My hon. Friend is absolutely right
that it also does not include the consequences and costs
of a failure to tackle climate change, although the
committee’s report sets out in great detail some of the
negative consequences were we and the rest of the world
to fail to act.

Liam Byrne (Birmingham, Hodge Hill) (Lab): I, too,
welcome today’s statement as an important step forward.
I hope the Secretary of State will join me in congratulating
Birmingham City Council, which last night declared a
climate emergency and a much more ambitious date to
achieve it. We will work together to take advantage
of the transition we need.

It would be a misreading of economic history if the
Secretary of State forgot the mission critical role of a
creative, active state in driving industrial revolutions
happen. In our region that means we need municipal
energy companies to drive forward solar in the cities,
green development corporations to help us build green
council houses, an office of community wealth building
to target the procurement spend we put into the market
each year, a national education service to make sure we
have the skills, and a regional investment bank to make
sure we have the capital.

Will the Secretary of State work with us to help our
region be the first to become zero carbon? That is the
target we would like to set because, of course, we
sparked the carbon revolution in the first place.

Greg Clark: As the right hon. Gentleman says, the
west midlands has a distinguished role not just in the
history but in the future of industrial production in this
country and around the world. He is right that that
sense of place is important and that it is crucial the
Government play an active role in this at every level. We
just need to look at the success of offshore wind, which
was driven, in part at least, by a framework in which
private companies could invest with confidence, knowing
that they would be supported.

It is open to local authorities and to companies to
take decisions themselves on when they can be carbon
neutral, and many have done so. I am interested to hear
that the right hon. Gentleman’s council has followed
suit. He knows that the west midlands industrial strategy,
which was mentioned in Prime Minister’s questions, has
a substantial recognition of the opportunities across
the region not only for participating in solving climate
change but in reaping the benefits of the technologies.

Luke Graham (Ochil and South Perthshire) (Con): I
welcome the announcement. My right hon. Friend will
appreciate that this has policy implications right the
way through central Government, devolved authorities
and local government. Can he reassure the House that
central Government will lean forward and engage with
evory part of the United Kingdom to make sure we
deliver this target so that we avoid negative targets such
as the zero landfill target in Scotland, which sees
opportunities lost and waste shipped to northern England,
and so we see positive initiatives like the international
environment centre in Alloa and, hopefully, geothermal
in Clackmannanshire?

Greg Clark: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. We
have set out a global ambition, and it would be absurd if
we were divided within this United Kingdom on how
we achieve it. We will work together to take advantage
of all the opportunities, including in Scotland, to achieve
the transition we need.

Mr Chris Leslie (Nottingham East) (Change UK):
This is an important commitment, but will the Secretary
of State make sure he publishes the impact assessment
and the cost-benefit analysis so that, if we want to bring
this forward to 2045, we can continue to review it and
do so? Is it not a glaring omission that Brexit is not
mentioned at all in this statement? There are a number
of ways in which the European Union helps us to
reduce carbon emissions. Will the EU emissions trading
scheme continue? What will happen to the EU funding
for low-carbon projects? Many of us believe that we
should remain in the European Union if we want to
leverage our impact on carbon reduction.

Greg Clark: Sometimes I agree strongly with the hon.
Gentleman, and on climate matters we have a record of
leading in the European Union. The legislation that was
passed and the achievements we have made are in
advance of other European countries. It is within the
capacity of this Parliament and this Government to
make the necessary changes. I want us to lead Europe,
as well as leading the world.

Stephen Metcalfe (South Basildon and East Thurrock)
(Con): I warmly welcome this announcement. Will the
Secretary of State join me in encouraging everyone
inside and outside this House to see decarbonisation as
an opportunity to be grasped, not a burden to be
managed? Combining technology, particularly artificial
intelligence, can lead to lower costs, economic benefits, efficiencies, cleaner energy and, of course, high-quality employment opportunities for our constituents.

**Greg Clark:** I agree with my hon. Friend, whom I congratulate on being reappointed as the Prime Minister’s envoy on engineering, which makes a huge contribution. We need to have the skills to be able to take up the jobs and to implement the changes that are being made here. Training the next generation of engineers will be crucial.

From his work on the Science and Technology Committee, my hon. Friend knows the importance of innovation in this. Innovation enjoys prominent billing in my response today, and with just cause because it will be one of the ways in which we succeed.

**Kerry McCarthy** (Bristol East) (Lab): It is a simple fact that we cannot reach net zero without a change in diet, a radical rethink of land use, at least a halving of food waste and embedding sustainability in the food chain from farm to fork. It is all well and good for Ministers to talk about carbon sequestration from soil and planting more trees, but that is very much the safe ground. We need to see a far more ambitious strategy both from the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy and from the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs to achieve the reduction in emissions from food and farming that we need to see. Will the Secretary of State start by endorsing the National Farmers Union’s commitment to reach net zero by 2040?

**Greg Clark:** I am always strongly supportive of the NFU and its work to make food and farming not only sustainable but a source of prosperity for this country. The hon. Lady is absolutely right that there are challenges and opportunities in how we use land. Across the Government, and I hope across this House, we can work together to make sure those opportunities are reaped and applied so that we can benefit from them in this country and export them around the world.

**Alex Chalk** (Cheltenham) (Con): This is hugely welcome. A legal commitment to net zero will help to preserve our planet while encouraging the kind of tech and innovation that we can export around the world. It is hugely welcome in Cheltenham, too.

I congratulate the Prime Minister and the Secretary of State on their decisive and historic leadership on this issue. What is the plan to ensure that other countries face up to their responsibilities, too?

**Greg Clark:** I commend my hon. Friend for his well-supported Climate Change (Net Zero UK Carbon Account) Bill and for his fantastic speech in support of it, in which he urged us in this direction. It is a source of great pleasure to me that we can meet his ambitions.

We will have an early opportunity to advance this cause with our international partners and with all countries around the world if, as I hope, we succeed in hosting the next conference of the parties, which takes place next year.

**Dr David Drew** (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): We would not be here discussing this today if not for Extinction Rebellion and the hundreds of thousands of young people who, week after week, grabbed this issue and brought it back into the mainstream. With that in mind, and given that many local authorities have more ambitious targets, will the Secretary of State agree to include in his plan at least an opportunity to meet this target at a much earlier time?

**Greg Clark:** I have referred to the hugely important contribution that young people have made in advocating the action we are taking, and they are joined by many other campaigners in this country and around the world. The substantial report of the Committee on Climate Change, which I hope the hon. Gentleman will have a chance to study in detail, makes a proposal that is not plucked out of the air but is evidenced and referenced. In adopting and legislating for this target, we are doing so on the best possible advice. That is the best way to proceed.

**Nigel Huddleston** (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): I enthusiastically welcome today’s net zero announcement, because this issue has an impact on us all, and especially on young people. I therefore particularly welcome the announcement of a youth steering group to advise the Government on this issue, and perhaps we could employ this model in other policy areas. When will we find out a little more about the role and purpose of this group?

**Greg Clark:** Everything my hon. Friend does is with enthusiasm. We will publish the details of the terms of reference and composition of the group in the next few days, and I hope it will meet with his approval.

**Geraint Davies** (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op): The Secretary of State knows that the reason for our leadership on emissions is that we have relocated much of our manufacturing to China and elsewhere, and closed our coalmines. Is he aware of the predictions of Professor Yangyang Xu, published in Nature magazine, which simply show that because there is more methane production than originally projected and less sulphur, which has a cooling effect, we are expected now to reach the 1.5°C threshold not by 2040 but by 2030? In the light of that, will the Secretary of State look again at the assumptions underlying the report on which he is predating his 2050 target, with a view to bringing that forward? Will he listen to some of the pressure groups, such as Extinction Rebellion, which want firmer action, be it getting rid of fracking, or action on wave, solar or wind, and move forward more quickly, because there is a desperate emergency and this statement is simply too little, too late?

**Greg Clark:** The hon. Gentleman is wrong in saying that the reduction in emissions comes simply from exporting our production; he does a disservice to the hundreds and thousands of men and women who work in our renewables industry and lead the world in the development of offshore wind. It is a source of great national pride and I hope he will join in that. The Committee on Climate Change is a serious and substantial body that has done an important piece of work. It was rightly established by his party when he was in government, and those on both sides of the House have respected its advice. The Committee references and is impelled by the latest climate science, which, as he says, requires a more urgent response than was previously committed to. That is exactly why it has provided this advice and exactly why we are legislating to implement it.
Derek Thomas (St Ives) (Con): Cornwall was early in declaring a climate emergency, and it will be glad to hear today’s commitment, not least because of the opportunity to create well-paid skilled jobs by doing the right thing. The Committee on Climate Change recommendations talk about a massive skilled jobs programme and we have seen the need for that today. We are talking about the roll-out of smart meters, which helps to address the climate change emergency; the need for storage, as we heard from my Cornish colleague; home efficiency improvements; and even the management of waste food. Those things all require new skills and existing skills that people do not have at the moment. Will the Secretary of State work with the Department for Education and, in particular, with the Treasury to make sure that further education colleges, which are well placed to deliver these skills, have the money and have it quickly?

Greg Clark: I will indeed do that. Let me give the example of the offshore wind sector deal, where one of the major commitments between the industry and government was to establish the skills needed in the supply chain to be able to create those jobs and allow the industry to flourish. This does not just apply to offshore wind; it applies across the clean energy sector. That is a good model for how to proceed.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): I, too, welcome today’s announcement. However, the Liberal Democrats are setting out more ambitious targets to achieve net zero greenhouse gas emissions by 2045, together with clear interim targets to make sure that we do not kick the can down the road and avoid difficult decisions now. Does the Minister recognise that today’s announcement somewhat contradicts Government policies on, for example, fracking, which is a fossil fuel, and on withdrawal from the European Union, which undermines international co-operation?

Greg Clark: No, I do not. I am disappointed that the hon. Lady seems to be speaking on behalf of the Liberal Democrats in withdrawing the support for the Climate Change Act 2008, which set up the committee to give advice to the Government. The committee has been clear in saying that the ambition of 2050 is the right one for the United Kingdom. If she reads the report, she will respect the evidence on which that is based. It is always possible—and in our exchanges we have said that the Act provides for this ability—to review that progress and for the committee to give further advice. I have said that in five years’ time we will go back to the committee to ask it for an assessment of how we are doing.

Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby) (Lab): What are the Government doing to support bioenergy and carbon capture and storage technology to enable the energy estuary of the Humber to become the UK’s first net zero industrial cluster?

Greg Clark: The hon. Lady knows that the Humber is one of the prime areas that can benefit from the capture of carbon by the high emitters of CO₂. We have a commitment to invest in carbon capture, usage and storage, and I know that across the Humber we have a strong contender for part of that investment fund.

Angus Brendan MacNeil (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): Last night, at the Renewable Energy Association dinner, its chair, Nina Skorupska, said that the Committee on Climate Change should be renamed the committee to say climate emergency. With that in mind, this net carbon zero statement is going in the right direction. A practical step to help what the Secretary of State is talking about would be to build a 600 MW interconnector to the Hebrides, rather than a 450 MW one. That would give us 33% more capacity for only 5% extra cost, and the extra electricity it would produce would probably drop wholesale prices and even eradicate that. Given today’s statement, will he make sure that Ofgem sees the big picture and gives the 600 MW the green light? Ofgem is currently not fit for purpose in this regard, because if it keeps its blinkered formula, its policies will result not in 600 MW or 450 MW, but in net zero MW.

Greg Clark: I know that the hon. Gentleman is frustrated at the decision that Ofgem has taken. He and I had a successful and productive meeting in Stornoway a few years ago, as he will recall, to make it possible for remote islands to benefit from wind. He knows that Ofgem has an independent role, but I will follow up on his concerns.

Richard Burden (Birmingham, Northfield) (Lab): This morning, the all-party motor group, which I chair, met a wide range of senior representatives of UK automotive companies, and there was a real welcome for the announcement that the Government have committed to net zero by 2050. However, they also noted that there is so much more to do if we are going to get there. That has to include a step change in infrastructure investment, making sure that the rapid charging points are available in the quantities and places needed, and that they are interoperable, and ensuring that the grid can cope. They also noted that we have to manage the transition more effectively, which means ending the confusion in the Government’s signals about intermediate technologies, about the regulatory frameworks to be put in place and about the kinds of incentives that can help to change consumer behaviour. In a meeting set up by the Committee on Climate Change, I made that point directly to the Secretary of State that cutting back on the plug-in car grant does not necessarily help, in a market that is not yet mature?

Greg Clark: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for conveying the support of the automotive industry, which has a crucial role to play in this transition. He is right about, and in earlier exchanges I have paid particular attention to, the importance of getting that transition right, so that it does not have unintended consequences of depriving of investment an industry that is crucial to making that change. Of course we will look at all the policy components. The plug-in grant was established and has been successful in launching an industry—or, at least, in expanding the early take-up of an industry. It was intended that it should come to an end when its budget was exhausted, but of course, through the spending review, decisions will need to be taken on how the industry can be supported in future.

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): The Secretary of State was correct to refer to the important role that the Clyde shipyards played in the first industrial revolution, but of course they will also
have an important role to play in the next green industrial revolution if there is an appropriate industrial strategy. That is why I am dismayed that in respect of the offshore wind sector deal that the Government announced, they buckled to the lobbying by large energy companies and diluted the requirement for 60% of manufactured content to be made in the UK down to 60% of through-life content. As a result, EDF is sending the £2 billion contract for manufacturing a wind farm off the coast of Fife to Indonesia, instead of building it in the BiFab yards that lie 10 miles away on the coast of Fife and employ 1,000 people. Will the Secretary of State address this glaring inconsistency in the offshore wind sector strategy and ensure that we maximise British manufacturing of heavy engineered products in British renewable energy projects?

**Greg Clark:** The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right that our heritage and skills in shipbuilding are now being put to use throughout the country in marine energy and offshore wind in particular, but he will acknowledge that the commitment in the sector deal was to increase UK content. That was the right ambition to establish and it was agreed between the industry and the Government, although it can of course be kept under review. We always want to see content produced in the UK, including in the very shipyards that the hon. Gentleman mentioned that were so important in our first industrial revolution.

**Dr Sarah Wollaston** (Totnes) (Ind): I warmly welcome the commitment to net zero emissions. Does the Secretary of State agree that to help to achieve that we need to do far more to encourage people out of their cars where possible and to make more journeys by cycling or walking? We know what works to achieve European levels of cycling; will the Secretary of State commit to looking into the evidence and meeting me and the all-party group on cycling to see what further can be done to achieve those targets?

**Greg Clark:** I would be delighted to do that. I am a strong advocate and have campaigned for and achieved the establishment of some important new cycle routes in my constituency. They are a good example of something that makes a contribution to the environment as well as giving us all opportunities to enjoy the fresh air and in many cases the countryside, including in the hon. Lady’s beautiful constituency.

**Cat Smith** (Lancaster and Fleetwood) (Lab): My Lancashire constituents want to step up and play their role in meeting the climate emergency, including by choosing greener transport options. Will the Secretary of State look into opening disused rail lines, such as the one into Fleetwood, as part of the strategy? Does he recognise that fracking locks us into a reliance on fossil fuels for years to come? Will he review the Government’s support for fracking?

**Greg Clark:** I will of course talk to my colleagues in the Department for Transport. As the hon. Lady said, we need to look into all the options to give people a choice of how to get about that is environmentally sustainable. On gas, whether derived onshore or offshore, the Committee on Climate Change has always been clear that in the transition to net zero there is a role for gas in all scenarios. In my view, if we have a domestic contribution to that, that helps with the resilience of our energy supplies.

**Ben Lake** (Ceredigion) (PC): The Secretary of State rightly referred in his statement to the historic opportunity before Parliament to make real progress in tackling climate change by achieving net zero carbon emissions. In order fully to realise that opportunity, will the Government reconsider existing policies—such as those relating to maximising the extraction of offshore oil and gas deposits—to ensure that they comply with the aspiration outlined this afternoon?

**Greg Clark:** As I said to the hon. Member for Lancaster and Fleetwood (Cat Smith), the Committee on Climate Change, which advises not only the Government but the House and the country on this issue, recognises the need for a transition and that gas and oil will be required in that context. As we recognise the jobs and exports generated by gas and oil, it seems to me that we should do that as efficiently as we can and with the best deployment of technology that we possibly can.

**Alex Sobel** (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): As the Secretary of State knows, I am usually supportive of our bid to host COP 26, on which I led on a joint letter with the hon. Member for Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland (Mr Clarke) that was signed by more than 100 Members, but I am concerned that we are due to miss the fourth and fifth carbon budget targets. The explanatory notes that accompany the statutory instrument laid this morning say that the Government will leave headroom for emissions from international aviation and shipping. When will we adopt a Norwegian-style plan on aviation and shipping emissions that will eradicate those emissions and mean that we can meet our carbon budget targets?

**Greg Clark:** We have followed the advice of the Committee on Climate Change and our plans for net zero cover the whole economy, including international aviation and shipping. We await the committee’s advice on how to legislate. One opportunity that our hosting the COP would bring forward is the ability to accelerate international agreements. I hope the hon. Gentleman would welcome that.

**Matthew Pennycook** (Greenwich and Woolwich) (Lab): I join others in welcoming the legislation, but does the Secretary of State genuinely believe that the machinery of government is currently organised in such a way as to facilitate the type of ambitious policy response that we will need in this Parliament in order for the target to have credibility? He will know that we used to have a clean growth inter-ministerial group, but no such body now exists. Does he agree that, given the scale and pace of the transition required, we will almost certainly need to make changes to the institutional architecture of government to co-ordinate and drive progress across all Departments?

**Greg Clark:** The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right that we should have the best arrangement. In fact, that inter-ministerial group does exist, and my hon. Friend
the Minister for Energy and Clean Growth chaired its most recent meeting just last week. The hon. Gentleman should reflect on the creation of my Department, which brought together the responsibilities for business and industry with energy and climate change, because that is a recognition that if we want, as we must, to take action to achieve the targets, we must make sure that the economy is run and companies operate in a way that supports that action. It is a practical example of just the kind of thinking and acting that the hon. Gentleman advocates.

John Woodcock (Barrow and Furness) (Ind): The 2050 deadline is of course important, but anyone who has seen how Parliament is squandering its time ahead of 31 October will understand that deadlines are not sufficient in and of themselves. What is the Secretary of State going to do on two critical issues: what is he going to do to rescue the Moorside nuclear deal and Wylfa; and will he meet the team behind the strategic business case that is being put together for the plan for a tidal barrage across Morecambe bay and the Duddon, which could be transformative?

Greg Clark: I am happy to meet anyone who has a contribution to make, both to reducing our emissions and to achieving technological advances. On the nuclear industry, the hon. Gentleman knows that the financing of new nuclear power stations has been done commercially, and we are reviewing the financing model to see whether a different approach might address some of the difficulties that private sector investors have had in financing the scale of investment required for new nuclear. That review will report soon.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): On behalf of the Democratic Unionist party, I welcome the Government’s continuing commitment to deal with this vital issue. It is important that the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland does its bit to safeguard the environment for our children and grandchildren. Will the Secretary of State confirm that other countries are also committed and will do all that they can do to address the issue with equal determination?

Greg Clark: I am grateful for what the hon. Gentleman said; I know that he has regular discussions with the Minister for Energy and Clean Growth and is a strong advocate. Northern Ireland is one of the parts of the United Kingdom that has benefited strongly from clean energy and its deployment. We will continue that effort and I am grateful for the hon. Gentleman’s support.
review, we have kept Whirlpool’s actions under review. A letter was issued to Whirlpool, which was given 28 days to respond, and it did just that. We have informed it of our intention to issue a recall. That is part of the regulatory process. That is what I was updating the House on. We had 10 days to inform Whirlpool of that, and I believe that Friday is the deadline for that. I hope that satisfies the hon. Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter).

Andy Slaughter indicated dissent.

Mr Speaker: It may well be the summit of the hon. Lady’s parliamentary ambition to satisfy the hon. Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter), but it may be that some years—or possibly decades, from my experience—are required before she can hope to attain that dizzy height. The hon. Gentleman does not look particularly satisfied. Nevertheless, the hon. Lady has discharged her obligations to the House, and we are grateful to her for doing so. If, as I surmise from the hon. Gentleman’s countenance, he remains dissatisfied, he knows that there are means by which he can secure fuller ministerial attention to this matter, and the House’s attention to it, in days to come.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): They are killing people.

Mr Speaker: This is indeed a matter of the highest importance, involving life and death, as the hon. Member for Huddersfield (Mr Sheerman) helpfully observes.

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (PC): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. The Welsh media today report that the Foreign and Commonwealth Office will remove diplomatic support from the First Minister of Wales on his visit to Brussels today unless he toes the UK Government line, whatever that is. There is no bigger critic of the Labour Welsh Government than me, but I am outraged, as I am sure the people of Wales are, at the complete lack of respect shown to the Government of my country by the British Government. Welsh people pay taxes, too, and the FCO is supposed to serve their interests, too. Could you, Mr Speaker, advise me on how I could raise this issue as a matter of urgency with those on the Treasury Bench?

Mr Speaker: To some extent, the hon. Gentleman has achieved his own salvation by airing the matter in the Chamber. That is not a point of order as such, but I am minded to observe that, although there is a lot of repeat business in the House in the form of attempted points of order, I can recall no occasion, during my occupancy of the Chair, in which such a concern has had to be aired, so it is indeed a most significant matter. I am taken aback by what the hon. Gentleman reported to me in advance and has now raised orally on the Floor of the House. He has achieved some satisfaction by alerting those on the Treasury Bench to his concern. My advice is that he should go to the Table Office and table questions on this matter. I know that the dedicated and highly capable staff of the Table Office will be happy to assist him in that important endeavour.

BILL PRESENTED

NON-DOMESTIC RATING (LISTS)

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Secretary James Brokenshire, supported by the Prime Minister, Mr David Lidington, Mr Chancellor of the Exchequer, Secretary Greg Clark, Jesse Norman and Rishi Sunak, presented a Bill to make provision to change the dates on which non-domestic rating lists must be compiled; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time tomorrow, and to be printed (Bill 402) with explanatory notes (Bill 402-EN).
Parental Leave (Premature and Sick Babies)

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

2.25 pm

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to extend entitlements to parental leave for parents of babies born prematurely or requiring neonatal care; and for connected purposes.

As well as being the MP for Glasgow East, and above all else, I am Isaac and Jessica’s dad. Both Isaac and Jessica were born prematurely and spent the early weeks of their lives in neonatal care so, from the outset, I declare a deeply personal interest in the issue that I am seeking to legislate on today.

My wife and I understood that having children at all might be difficult, but in February 2015, we learned, to our immense joy, that we were expecting our first child. Owing to a pre-existing medical condition, Roslyn was told that hers would be a complex, high-risk pregnancy with a higher chance of ending in stillbirth.

In the early hours of 26 June 2015, our son Isaac was born prematurely at the Southern General Hospital in Glasgow. During an aborted labour that evolved into an emergency caesarean section, Isaac’s heart rate plummeted. His blood sugars were incredibly low and he could not breathe without assistance. Within a few moments of being born, he was whisked away from Roslyn and me and transferred to the neonatal intensive care unit, where he spent the earliest part of his life in an incubator, hooked up to countless machines and wires. In that unit, over a period, Isaac received amazing love, care and support from our national health service, which stabilised his breathing, allowed his heart rate to recover and built up his blood sugars. It would be days before we could even hold him. Our only contact with him was holding his tiny hands through holes in the incubator.

Three years later, just last September, we went through all that again for the birth of Jessica. Jessica’s hospital stay was even longer, due to protracted breathing difficulties that culminated in her spending the first eight months of her life on oxygen. I still vividly remember watching her turning blue and having to be resuscitated by nurses in the neonatal intensive care unit.

I say all this because sadly this is the norm—the reality—for many parents across the United Kingdom. Each year, around 100,000 babies are born prematurely or sick and have an extended stay in neonatal care. I speak for every family on the neonatal unit when I say a heartfelt thank you to NHS staff for supporting our children, and us as families, through an incredibly distressing, uncertain and vulnerable time.

That stress, uncertainty and vulnerability show that current legislation is simply not fit for purpose. UK employment legislation takes no account of the fact that some babies will spend much longer in hospital after being born, especially if they are born premature or sick. As a result, parents, particularly dads, require extra paid parental leave beyond that covered under current arrangements. My statutory maternity leave had run out by the time Isaac and Jessica were discharged from the neonatal unit. Sadly, that is the case for so many parents who face the brutal decision to return to work while their child is still in hospital. Research by the charity Bliss found that two thirds of dads had to return to work while their baby was still receiving specialist neonatal care.

The Government know that there are major challenges for us; that is why they commissioned a review on barriers to the labour market for parents of premature and sick babies. Unfortunately, despite that review concluding, the Government still refuse to publish the details or to take action, hence why I feel the need to bring a Bill here via the private Members’ route.

One of the biggest problems is that so many families face an employee/employer lottery out there, a lottery that so many of us simply cannot afford to play. A number of employers in the public and private sectors have gone above and beyond to ensure that employees can be with their family on the neonatal unit and still receive pay. One such example is Waltham Forest Council. Employees there are entitled to an extra week of leave for every week their premature baby spends in hospital before their due date. In the private sector, another good example is Sony Music, which also ensures that employees are entitled to full pay during the period in which a baby is born before full term.

That is great if someone works for Waltham Forest Council or Sony Music, but the vast majority of us do not work for them. My Bill would therefore ensure that families no longer face an employment rights lottery when heading into the neonatal unit.

Across the world, other countries have already taken action to provide better rights and support for the parents of premature and sick babies. In Sweden, maternity leave commences at the point of discharge. In Ireland, maternity leave and pay are extended by the amount of time between birth and the original expected birth date. Here in the UK, however, we are seriously lagging behind and failing parents when they need us most.

Lawrence Quayle, a former retail worker, is just one of those parents. He was left with no choice but to be signed off as sick after his son Leo arrived 15 weeks early. Lawrence said:

“When I told my employer that my wife had gone into early labour, there was a dispute between my line manager—who was supporting me—and her manager about whether I could start my paternity leave early. I was dealing with HR when my son was just a few days old and needed me at his cot-side.

Eventually, I was given my paternity leave but because Leo was in intensive care at a hospital 60 miles from home, I knew I’d need more time with him and to support my wife.

Things with Leo were very touch and go and there were a number of occasions where it looked like we could lose him. I was told I couldn’t take any annual leave and could only take unpaid leave—which I simply could not afford.

I ended up being signed off from work with stress for two months. The strain this put on my relationship with the managers at work meant that I chose to leave the company shortly afterwards.”

Lawrence’s story is a perfect illustration of how current employment legislation simply fails families when they need our protection and support most. By allowing the Bill to proceed today, we can right that wrong and truly tackle a burning injustice that could be so easily extinguished for the parents of all those future Isaacs and Jessicas who, too, will start their life in neonatal intensive care. I therefore commend the Bill to the House.

Question put and agreed to.
Ordered,
That David Linden, Paul Masterton, Rachel Reeves, Ben Lake, Layla Moran, Jim Shannon, Alison Thewliss, Chris Elmore, Luciana Berger, Gavin Newlands, Maria Caulfield and Caroline Lucas present the Bill.

David Linden accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time tomorrow, and to be printed (Bill 403).

Leaving the EU: Business of the House

2.33 pm

Keir Starmer (Holborn and St Pancras) (Lab): I beg to move,
(1) That, on Tuesday 25 June—
(a) Standing Order No. 14(1) (which provides that government business shall have precedence at every sitting save as provided in that order) shall not apply;
(b) precedence shall be given to a motion relating to the Business of the House in connection with matters relating to the United Kingdom’s withdrawal from the European Union;
(c) if more than one motion relating to the Business of the House is tabled, the Speaker shall decide which motion shall have precedence;
(d) the Speaker shall interrupt proceedings on any business having precedence before the Business of the House motion at 1.00 pm and call a Member to move that motion;
(e) debate on that motion may continue until 2.00 pm at which time the Speaker shall put the questions necessary to dispose of proceedings on that motion including the questions on amendments selected by the Speaker which may then be moved;
(f) any proceedings interrupted or superseded by this order may be resumed or (as the case may be) entered upon and proceeded with after the moment of interruption.

I move the motion in the names of the Leader of the Opposition and of the leaders of the SNP, the Liberal Democrats, Plaid Cymru and the Greens, and I am thankful for the support of the right hon. Member for West Dorset (Sir Oliver Letwin).

This is a genuinely cross-party motion—so much so that for a short while at least it appeared even to have the support of one of the Conservative leadership candidates, the Secretary of State for International Development, but I assume that after a phone call from his Chief Whip he thought better of it.

The motion makes a simple proposition: that, on 25 June, Parliament and not the Executive will have control of the business of the House. That would ensure an opportunity for the House to bring forward a further business motion to set out, at that later date, a schedule for the stages of a parliamentary Bill relating to our departure from the EU.

Sir William Cash (Stone) (Con): Will the right hon. and learned Gentleman give way?

Keir Starmer: I will in a moment, but I want to set out what we seek to achieve.

I want to be clear: the motion does not introduce legislation today; it does not specify what form any subsequent legislation should take; and it does not prevent the Executive from seeking to pass a Brexit deal. Instead, it is a first and limited step to ensure that Parliament cannot be locked out of the Brexit process over the coming weeks and months. It paves the way for Parliament to take further action, including to prevent no deal, should the House consider that necessary.
Crucially, the motion means that if the next Prime Minister were foolish enough to pursue no deal without gaining the consent of this House, or to prorogue Parliament to force through no deal, Parliament would have the means to prevent that. It is a motion to empower Parliament. It would introduce a safety valve in the Brexit process and be a reminder to all Conservative leadership candidates that this House will take every step necessary to prevent no deal.

**Sir William Cash:** Will the right hon. and learned Gentleman be good enough to tell us exactly which constitutional authority he refers to? Every single constitutional authority that has ever been written is clear that we operate on the basis of parliamentary government, not government by Parliament. Can he cite an example of that being abrogated in any constitutional authority?

**Keir Starmer:** The Bill that we passed in March mandated the Prime Minister to seek an extension of article 50. We are in unprecedented times. Parliament has to have the ability to speak on this issue. When we face the suggestion by some leadership contenders that Parliament be prorogued and shut out of the process, we are forced to take action.

**Ms Angela Eagle** (Wallasey) (Lab): Is my right hon. and learned Friend as alarmed as I am by the cavalier way in which certain contenders fighting the election for the leadership of the Conservative party seem to think that they can cast Parliament aside to ensure that they have their no-deal Brexit, when this Parliament clearly would not allow a no-deal Brexit to pass? In those circumstances, is not the responsible and right thing to do to give this Parliament the chance to prevent such outrageous shenanigans?

**Keir Starmer:** I agree with every word of that intervention, and I am grateful for it.

The motion makes a simple but important proposition. Let me address why. Primarily, after nine years of austerity, a no-deal Brexit would make the huge social and economic challenges that the country already faces much worse. In the words of manufacturers organisation Make UK, it would be an act of “economic lunacy”. To quote the CBI, it would take a “sledgehammer” to the economy, and Toyota has said that “no deal is terrible” and would “create big additional challenges”. Only yesterday, I was with GMB representatives at the Ford plant in Bridgend. They were very clear about the appalling impact of no deal on jobs.

**Catherine West** (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): Does my right hon. and learned Friend agree that an internal conflict in the Conservative party is creating a constitutional crisis in this country?

**Keir Starmer:** It did not end well for Charles I. We find ourselves in a very serious position. Having been through the best part of three years of debate and argument about Brexit, there is a suggestion that Parliament should be shut out of the process, with no further business until November. That is completely unacceptable.

**Tom Brake** (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): Some highly irresponsible Tory leadership contenders are traipsing around the country advocating no deal when before the referendum they were saying, for example, “mutual self-interest suggests we’d cut a very good deal”, or talking about “a free trade arrangement that continues to give access to UK goods and services on the European continent.” There are many other examples where those very same candidates, prior to the referendum, were offering the best deal possible, but now seem to be advocating crashing out—which would not affect them personally, financially speaking. I am sure, but would affect many of their constituents.

**Keir Starmer:** I agree with that intervention and I am grateful for it. This translation, or attempted translation, of the vote to leave into a vote for no deal is to misrepresent the arguments and what was said at the time of the referendum.

**Neil Gray** (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): The hon. Member for Stone (Sir William Cash) asked us to contemplate examples of where a Parliament helps to set its own business rather than just the Government doing so. Of course, he does not have to look too far—only to Holyrood, where business is set by a Committee of the House. When we are discussing an issue as grave as a no-deal Brexit, would it not be a gross abdication of all our responsibilities if Parliament did not act to stop this Government pursuing such a ridiculous policy?

**Keir Starmer:** I agree. It would be an abdication of our responsibilities not to support this motion and give this foothold to Parliament to have proper involvement in what happens next.

**Hywel Williams** (Arfon) (PC): Some Conservative leadership contenders are of course in favour of no deal, while the former Foreign Secretary, the right hon. Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson), seemed this morning to be hedging his bets—it was not even clear whether he is clear or not, as it were. Does the shadow Secretary of State agree that there is no such thing as a clean and simple no deal, or a managed no deal, any more than a fall from a high building is managed until you hit the ground?

**Keir Starmer:** There is no such thing as a managed no deal. No deal would be chaotic and highly disruptive—for the economy, as I have already set out, but also in other areas. I was Director of Public Prosecutions for five years. I worked in Europol and Eurojust, and I worked with the security services day in, day out. I know all too well that no deal would cause immense disruption to
judicial co-operation and to joint criminal investigations going on at the moment, and throw a wrench into vital arrangements on extradition and shared databases. I know the Secretary of State shares my concern about these issues.

No deal would make us less safe. I think, ultimately, that is why the current Prime Minister, whom I knew and worked with when she was Home Secretary, came to realise that no deal was never a credible policy. She did at one stage say that no deal should be the default and that it was her deal or no deal, but towards the end she recognised that it was not credible, for a number of reasons, but I think, ultimately, because of the impact, or likely impact, on national security and counter-terrorism provisions. These are not light issues for us to brush aside and not even have a voice on if we were to go down this route.

Then there is Ireland. The UK has a solemn vow to protect the Good Friday agreement and avoid a hard border in all circumstances. It is one of the most important treaties this country has ever entered into, and it is one that we cannot break or undermine. We should be clear that a no-deal Brexit risks that. I know how concerned communities on both sides of the border are about that.

The motion is simple and important. It is also necessary. Over recent weeks, we have witnessed the Conservative leadership contest descend into the disturbing, the ludicrous and the reckless. It has become an arms race to promise the most damaging form of Brexit or to make the most unworkable deal? That is how strong his commitment is to democracy.

Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab): What is my right hon. and learned Friend’s assessment of the likely reaction in the palace were an unelected new Prime Minister with no mandate to close down Parliament when Parliament had voted time and again, overwhelmingly, against no deal?

Keir Starmer: I do not know, and I hope that that never has to be tested.

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): Does the shadow Secretary of State share my anger and frustration at the way in which those words around taking back control have now been cynically reinterpreted to mean a reckless new Tory Prime Minister taking all the control for themselves and certainly not sharing it with the people—and much less their parliamentary representatives?

Keir Starmer rose—

Gareth Snell (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab/Co-op): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I apologise for interrupting the flow of debate. I understand that the motion before us is about the business of the House on 25 June, yet we seem to be having a far-ranging debate on the merits, or otherwise, of a no-deal Brexit and the outcome of the Conservative leadership election. Have I missed some additional paperwork on this matter, or is this now a debate on the principles of no deal, which I absolutely would not support?

Mr Speaker: No. The hon. Gentleman is a perceptive denizen of the House, and he has not missed any relevant paperwork. He is right about the procedural character of the motion. There is a degree of latitude as the background to the debate—the context in which it is taking place—is aired, but I am sure that ere long colleagues will wish to focus on the procedural specificity of the motion, both for their own sakes and possibly to satisfy the parliamentary palate of the hon. Gentleman.

Keir Starmer: I was about to respond to the intervention by the hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion (Caroline Lucas). I do think it is fundamental that we deal with the argument that it is in any way proper to close down Parliament at such a critical stage of the exercise. The idea of Parliament not sitting and not having any business until November is unthinkable, and we have to take action to prevent that from happening. I double-took when the right hon. Member for Esher and Walton said that and wanted to check that it is actually what he said, but of course it is. My office did try to read more about the former Brexit Secretary’s plan on his campaign website. However, they were met yesterday with this rather ominous message: “Access to dominicraab2019.com is denied because it belongs to a category that we block to protect customers using the Parliamentary network.”

Quite right, too. [Laughter.]

Steve Brine (Winchester) (Con): I always knew that the parliamentary ICT people would get it right in the end.

After a few weeks’ respite from this, we seem to be back on to it, but I am not sure that we have moved on. People have said that this House has expressed the view that we do not want to leave with no deal. However, there are only two ways in which this House can do that: it can either revoke article 50 or vote for a deal. It has done neither. When are the shadow Secretary of State and Opposition Front Benchers going to decide which they choose—revoke or a deal?

Keir Starmer: I just want to be clear about what today is about. It is not about the substance. It is about the business of the House so that the House can decide what to do next. The House can move forward only with a majority. If there is a majority against no deal, and I believe there is, that majority needs to be heard now more than ever. That is all that this motion is about. The alternative is simply to say that it is perfectly acceptable for an incoming Prime Minister to push Parliament to one side at the most critical stage of the exercise and say, “It doesn’t matter if Parliament doesn’t want no deal—I’m not going to listen to it. In fact, I’m not going to even let it sit.”

Mr Bob Seely (Isle of Wight) (Con) rose—

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op) rose—
Keir Starmer: I am going to make some progress.

This is a serious point, because the Tory leadership race is now increasingly offering, as the Leader of the Opposition has said, a choice between no deal, no deal and no deal. Candidates are openly threatening to sideline or silence this House on an issue that would affect all our lives and the fabric of this country for a generation. That is reckless and it cannot be allowed to stand.

We may be using a novel parliamentary mechanism today—I accept that—but it is not the first time that I have had to make this kind of argument from the Dispatch Box. Time and again, I have stood here saying that Parliament must have a meaningful role in the process. When it got to the cross-party talks in April this year, there was a near consensus that they should have happened two years before. This pushing away of Parliament has been a huge part of the problem. The Prime Minister fought against us far too often, but every time this House fought back. Now we must focus on the next fight. We face the very real challenge that the next Prime Minister will force through a no-deal Brexit without the consent of this House or the British people.

Jim McMahon (Oldham West and Royton) (Lab/Co-op): I know there is a great deal of fear that the successful Tory candidate may be somebody who wants no deal, but it could also be somebody who wants to try to secure a deal. If that were the case, would it be the Labour party's position that we would re-enter negotiations, to try to get an agreement that this House can support?

Keir Starmer: I am grateful for that intervention. As I made clear at the outset, this motion does not prevent a deal being passed by the House. It simply allows Parliament to have a say—a foothold—in the event that an incoming Prime Minister tries to force through no deal or shut Parliament out altogether.

Mr John Baron (Basildon and Billericay) (Con): To return to the substance of the debate, does the right hon. and learned Gentleman accept that if Government cannot control the business in this place, we risk ignoring the wishes of the electorate when it comes to elections, and election manifesto promises will turn to dust if this sort of thing is allowed to continue?

Keir Starmer: If the Government cannot control the business of the House, the Government should go.

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): My right hon. and learned Friend is giving an excellent defence of parliamentary democracy. Government Members are trying to derive legitimacy from a very narrow and contentious referendum result, which under no circumstances specified that no deal carried majority support in this country. Is it not the case that, through this action, Parliament is standing up for the will of the majority of people in this country?

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): Is it not the case that we face a ludicrous narrative that there is the possibility of walking away from the EU with no deal, when the very first request, if there is any attempt at a free trade deal, will be dealing with citizens, dealing with the money and dealing with the border in Ireland?

Jim McMahon: I am grateful for that intervention. The latter principle is the weightier one and the one we should bear in mind when we vote today.

Keir Starmer: I agree. The difficulty is that if I were to list every ludicrous promise and statement that has been made in the Conservative party leadership contest so far, there would be no time for other speakers in the debate. There is a ludicrous concept that the EU has always been willing to ditch the backstop, and it only takes the likes of some of the leadership contenders to go and ask for it, and it will happen. I do not know a great deal about the details of the current Prime Minister’s negotiating strategy, but I do know that had it been possible to get an alternative to the backstop, she would have sought to secure it. That is what she was trying to do. The idea that a new Prime Minister can go across to Brussels and the EU will say, “Well, we don’t bother about that any more. That’s fine—if you’re asking for it, the backstop will go” is simply ludicrous. The promises being made are ludicrous, and they are going to fall apart. The EU is not going to change its position, and this Parliament is not going to change its position on no deal. That is why we have to have a vote at this crucial time.

Mr Sam Gyimah (East Surrey) (Con): It strikes me that there are two principles at stake today. One of them is the convention in this House that the Government should be able to control the Order Paper, and the other is the constitutional principle of whether the Government can prorogue Parliament in pursuit of their policy objectives, with all that that means for the Crown and the Queen’s involvement in politics. I believe that the latter principle is the weightier one and the one we should bear in mind when we vote today.

Keir Starmer: I am grateful for that intervention. The prerogative powers always have to be seen and analysed in their political and historical context, and they always have been. As the House knows, prerogative powers have changed over time, and some of them have almost disappeared completely, because it has been recognised that what was a prerogative power needs to be a power that is vested in this House. We may well be at that point in relation to this prerogative power to push Parliament aside altogether, which needs properly to be tested.

The very idea of pushing Parliament aside between now and the next deadline for leaving, so that Parliament cannot have a voice, even to take preparatory steps for
no deal, only needs to be set out to be shown to be undemocratic. This motion is a safety valve. It is about providing certainty and empowering this House, and I urge all MPs to back it.

Speaker’s Announcement

Mr Speaker: I will now announce the result of the ballot held today for the election of a new Chair of the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee. Four hundred and forty-seven votes were cast, with three spoilt ballot papers. This means that 444 valid votes were cast, and the quota to be reached was therefore 223 votes. Simon Hoare was elected Chair, with 239 votes, after one round of counting. Maria Caulfield received 146 votes, and Mark Pritchard received 59 votes. Simon Hoare will take up his post immediately. I congratulate him on his success. The results of the count under the alternative vote system will be made available as soon as possible in the Vote Office and published on the internet for public viewing.
Leaving the EU: Business of the House

2.56 pm

The Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Stephen Barclay): May I be the first to congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for North Dorset (Simon Hoare) on his election to that important Select Committee, at an important time for it?

I want to begin by picking up on a few of the points that the right hon. and learned Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer) made in his opening remarks. The first passage of his speech covered what the motion does not do. He set out that it does not cover the legislation that it would unlock—it does not cover the substance, and it does not cover the form. So often in our exchanges at the Dispatch Box, he tells me how much he does not like a blind Brexit, and yet what we have before the House is, in essence, a blind motion. He devoted his opening remarks to the extent to which this is a blind motion, for it does not contain the detail on the basis of which the House will decide.

Interestingly, in the context of the Conservative leadership election, the right hon. and learned Gentleman went on to point out that a new Prime Minister would be limited—they would be unable to go to Brussels to secure a change of substance to the backstop—and yet his position is that a Labour Prime Minister would be able to go to Brussels to secure that. Within his remarks, one can see the contradictions inherent in the motion.

Let me deal with the substance of the motion. Section 1(b) gives precedence to any motion from any individual MP over Government business, and section 1(c) states that it is for you, Mr Speaker, to decide whether that motion is brought before the House over other motions. In essence, sections 1(b) and 1(c) say that an individual MP and the Speaker—two Members of the House—can override Government business. That is the effect of the motion. It puts in the hands of just two Members of Parliament the decision on which business takes precedence. That is what the text of 1(b) and 1(c) says.

Stephen Barclay: First, the hon. Lady says “he”, but there are a number of female candidates in the leadership election and one should not pre-empt the outcome. Secondly, we do not know who the Prime Minister will be. Thirdly, first let me deal with the text. [HON. MEMBERS: “Answer the question.”] I will happily come on to it, but I thought we were here, as per the direction of Mr Speaker and as the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Gareth Snell) said in an intervention, to debate the motion. [INTERUPTION.] The hon. Member for Heywood and Middleton (Liz McInnes) may chunter, but I am not surprised that she does not want to debate the motion, because it is a flawed motion, for reasons I will come on to. Labour Members do not want to debate the text that is before the House.

Christian Matheson (City of Chester) (Lab): I make way to the hon. Gentleman.

Mr Sheerman: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I have been in this House a hell of a long time, as most people know.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Kwasi Kwarteng): Too long! Mr Sheerman: They always say that, don’t they? The fact is that I have no idea what the Secretary of State is talking about when he mentions a “blind motion”. Could you tell us what he is talking about, Mr Speaker?

Mr Speaker: I do not think that what I would call motion exegesis is a matter for the Chair. I think it is for the Secretary of State to explain the terms of his comments on the motion. I am saddened if the hon. Gentleman is befuddled. I would not want him to remain in a state of nescience for any length of time, so I hope the Secretary of State will elaborate, and then clarity will descend on the hon. Gentleman and all the people of Huddersfield.

Stephen Barclay: I will happily respond. The hon. Member for Huddersfield (Mr Sheerman) is right: he has been in the House a long time—so long that he was actually a Eurosceptic when he arrived.

Mr Sheerman: And I grew up!

Stephen Barclay: There is still time.

Let me return to the text of the Opposition day motion, whose scope is virtually unlimited for business in relation to the UK’s withdrawal from the EU. Almost all aspects of our national life fall within that scope. Potentially, an individual Member could table a motion and it would be Mr Speaker alone who would determine precedence.

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): If recent election results have shown anything, it is the complete frustration of the British people with a failure to solve Brexit, and with Members of this House constantly saying what they do not support and do not believe in. Did my right hon. Friend hear anything in the 30-minute speech by the right hon. and learned Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer), or can he see anything in the motion, that remotely gives a positive or constructive solution or way forward to the Brexit impasse, rather than just more of what Members do not want?

Stephen Barclay: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. What we hear repeatedly from Opposition Members is what they are opposed to, and they do not support, and do not go for. That is reflected in the fact that the European Union— [INTERUPTION.] The shadow International Trade Secretary chutters. The European Union has been consistent in stating its view that the withdrawal agreement is the only offer on the table, but Labour Members voted against the withdrawal agreement, just as they voted against the deal each time. Their manifesto said that
they would respect the result, yet many Labour Members want a second referendum, which is clearly at odds with their manifesto.

Mr Kenneth Clarke (Rushcliffe) (Con): I entirely understand and appreciate my right hon. Friend’s tactics in trying to address procedural and textual points in the motion, rather than addressing the main point, which is rather difficult for the Government. I do not think those procedural and textual points would be raised if, by any sad chance, we were sitting on the Opposition Benches and telling a Government we opposed that the House as a whole wanted a debate and legislation on a particular issue.

Will my right hon. Friend move to the main point? Is he actually prepared to defend a situation where a new Prime Minister wishes to pursue a policy for which he or she knows there is no majority in the House of Commons? Does he believe it should be possible for that Prime Minister to prorogue and send away Parliament until he or she has exercised dictatorial powers to put the policy in place? That, I think, is plainly totally contrary to our constitution, and I do not see how any parliamentarian could possibly defend such a possibility.

Stephen Barclay: I and, I think, the majority of Members absolutely share the belief of the Father of the House that anything that brings Her Majesty into the politics of the House is to be avoided. I have consistently stated that position. However, may I pick up on the specifics? I always listen very closely to the Father of the House, and he said to concentrate not on the procedural and textual points but on the substance, yet the shadow Brexit Secretary said the exact opposite. He said that he did not want to get on to the substance because that is not in the text. Members who support the motion are saying, on the one hand, that we should look at the specifics put forward by the Opposition—[Interruption.] I do not support bringing Her Majesty into it; I have answered that question. But it is incoherent for Members who support the motion to say, on the other hand, “Don’t look at the substance,” and, on the other hand, that the House should consider the substance.

Mrs Anne Main (St Albans) (Con): My right hon. Friend is absolutely right to focus on the procedural nature of the motion. There are 10 leadership candidates and they have not yet been whittled down, yet this is an attempt to preserve a slot, through potentially one Member, just in case there is no appetite for someone who support the motion to say, on the one hand, “Don’t look at the substance,” and, on the other hand, that the House should consider the substance.

Anna Soubry (Broxtowe) (Change UK): Can the Secretary of State be very clear? Is he saying, on behalf of Her Majesty’s Government, that they accept and agree that a new Prime Minister could prorogue Parliament, in the face of this place persistently voting against leaving without a deal, deliberately and specifically in order to impose that very no deal without this Parliament having any say—yes or no?

Stephen Barclay: I speak as a Minister on behalf of this Government, and this Prime Minister has made it clear where she and the Cabinet stand on Prorogation. I have also set out the risk of any deviation from that position, because there is consensus across the House on the need to avoid any suggestion of bringing Her Majesty into a royal prerogative issue. Incidentally, the Opposition day motion does not mention the word “Prorogation”. They propose a fundamental change but do not want to deal with the issue on which the House is voting, which is the motion’s proposal to take over the Order Paper. That would be a fundamental change—Opposition Members who seek to be in government in future need to reflect on this—to the way in which this House operates, and it would happen without any consultation with the Procedure Committee. If people want to support that, what is the purpose of the Procedure Committee?

Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): I am grateful to the Secretary of State, who has never been a member of the Procedure Committee, for giving way. It is not the Procedure Committee’s role to pre-vet Opposition or Government motions that are put before the House. Will he come back to the central point? How would he feel if somebody proposed to prorogue the House to avoid the House having a voice on something about which he was in the majority? On this matter, he is in the minority.

Stephen Barclay: First, I am speaking on behalf of this Government. I do not know who the next Prime Minister will be or what decisions they will take. I have set out the risks of any deviation, and Mr Speaker has made it very clear, in terms of the way in which he would represent the will of the House, that there are a number of avenues. I would not want to interpret a judgment from the Chair, but the hon. Lady knows full well that in her exchange about Standing Order No. 24, the response from the Chair is germane to the issue. Any attempt at Prorogation would open the potential for SO 24 decisions.

The hon. Lady obviously did not want to deal with the text before the House, but let me consider what constitutional experts have said. Philip Cowley, professor at Queen Mary University’s School of Politics, said that taking the Order Paper outside the Government’s control would be “one of the most fundamental shifts in the relationship between the government and parliament.”

[Interruption.] Opposition Members chunter, “We have already done this.” Yes, but let us look at how effective that was. When it was done by the right hon. Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper), it was justified on the basis of her concern about the imminent risk of no deal. The constitutional advice from people such as Philip Cowley and Vernon Bogdanor,
said was unconstitutional.

parliamentary procedure that the constitutional experts passed in haste had the opposite effect to what was first, we had a situation whereby emergency legislation Lord Pannick and others. The ultimate irony is that, That was the premise of the amendments tabled by Vol. 797, c. 405.]

down this road, does not that set a dangerous precedent? I or two of our Conservative colleagues who are thinking control their business, they should step down. I ask one the only answer was that if the Government cannot spokesperson, to which we did not get an answer? Indeed, may I return him to the question I posed to the shadow constitutional change—passed in haste in a day—was overridden because, we were Spokesman, to which we did not get an answer? Indeed, then the involvement of the Procedure Committee, without due diligence and without proper consultation, to prevent no deal. However, what then happened in the House of Lords?

Anna Soubry: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I and many others are concerned about the time. This matter has been listed for an hour of debate. So far, the Front-Bench contributions have taken up 40 of the allotted 60 minutes. Some of us wish to speak, but in any event, we all agree that this is an important motion, properly tabled by Her Majesty’s Opposition and worthy of debate. Can you assist us all, Mr Speaker, about the likely length of this important debate?

Mr Speaker: I do not want to state an expected length now. I will say that the observation about an hour is something that may have got abroad, but it is mere surmise. This debate could run until 8.33 pm, which I am sure will be more than adequate time for the right hon. Lady to make her contribution. I do not suggest that the debate will run for anything like that time, but the right hon. Lady should not be overly preoccupied with the idea that it will run for only an hour and that therefore the House would be deprived of the opportunity of hearing both the intellectual rigour of her prospective contribution and her mellifluous tones. There is every prospect that several people will be heard.

Stephen Barclay: Of course, if I was not taking so many interventions, I would conclude my remarks with more alacrity. However, I accept the right hon. Lady’s request.

We were told last time that the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2019 had to be passed in a day in an unprecedented manner to stop no deal. Yet, Lord Pannick, when debating the measure, said that “the restrictions on the Prime Minister’s powers...may cause a no-deal exit”—[Official Report, House of Lords, 8 April 2019; Vol. 797, c. 405.]

That was the premise of the amendments tabled by Lord Pannick and others. The ultimate irony is that, first, we had a situation whereby emergency legislation passed in haste had the opposite effect to what was intended, and secondly, we were told that, to stop something unconstitutional, we needed to embrace parliamentary procedure that the constitutional experts said was unconstitutional.

Mr Baron: In support of my right hon. Friend’s case, may I return him to the question I posed to the shadow spokesman, to which we did not get an answer? Indeed, the only answer was that if the Government cannot control their business, they should step down. I ask one or two of our Conservative colleagues who are thinking of supporting the motion to reflect on that answer. I will try to get out of my right hon. Friend an answer that we could not get from the Opposition: if we go down this road, does not that set a dangerous precedent? The Government control the business of the House so that they can honour election manifesto promises. If we cannot do that, they turn to dust.

Stephen Barclay: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. I pray in aid the remarks of my right hon. Friend the Member for West Dorset (Sir Oliver Letwin). I always listen intently to him because he is a very experienced senior Member of the House. When the previous emergency legislation was passed, he said: “We have been driven to this only in an extreme emergency”.—[Official Report, 27 March 2019; Vol. 657, c. 342.]

That related to timing. Yet is difficult to say that there is an “extreme emergency” if the next Prime Minister is the candidate that my right hon. Friend supports.

Several hon. Members rose—

Stephen Barclay: I will take one last intervention and then, conscious of strictures, I will conclude.

Jim McMahon: Does the Secretary of State accept that part of the public’s anger and frustration with Parliament, notwithstanding the back and forth and even individual contributions, is caused by our failure to resolve this matter? The feeling is, “a plague on all your houses”. What message does it send if a power grab means that parliamentarians, who are sent here to make decisions, are instead sent home and excluded?

Stephen Barclay: I have voted for the withdrawal agreement three times; the hon. Gentleman has not. That is why there is frustration. However, that is not the primary issue before the House today. The hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central captured the matter last time we debated the subject. I hope that he does not mind my quoting him. He said:

“If we as a House are going to be asked to hand over day after day, we should know what we will be asked to vote on during those days.”—[Official Report, 1 April 2019; Vol. 657, c. 809.]

It is the nature of what the House is being asked to support today that is the issue: the concentration of control in a motion from an individual and the Speaker together; the fact that the scope is potentially so widespread; the fact that it is at odds with the manifestos on which both main parties stood. In essence, the problem is that the motion is an attempt to circumvent some of the internal tension in the Labour party that is best played out in its next conference rather than through a decision of this House. I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Basildon and Billericay (Mr Baron). We heard from the right hon. and learned Member for Holborn and St Pancras what this is really about: it is to say that the Government cannot control the Order Paper. It is, therefore, a way to get rid of the Government. I ask my colleagues to be mindful of that when they cast their votes.

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): It is a pleasure to speak this afternoon for Scotland’s national party in this debate. I congratulate the official Opposition and thank them for giving us this opportunity. I welcome the cross-party consensus that has seen, to my reckoning, every party bar one represented on the list of signatories to the motion. I congratulate the Secretary of State. I have always admired his ability, in best debating society style, to speak at great length without hesitation or
repetition. This afternoon, however, he managed to add the achievement of not actually saying anything during the whole time he was on his feet.

Let us forget the cries of democratic and constitutional outrage at the very idea that Parliament should decide what Parliament is going to discuss in the future. As my hon. Friend the Member for Airdrie and Shotts (Neil Gray) pointed out, there are very successful and highly regarded Parliaments not too far from this one where Parliament sets the business, and that seems to work perfectly well. The constitutional experts say it is a bad idea. I wonder what the predecessors of those same constitutional experts thought of the “ridiculous” notion that women should be allowed to vote and sit in this Parliament. No doubt they were telling us that that was a dangerous precedent, too.

**Ms Angela Eagle:** Does the hon. Gentleman agree with me that the Secretary of State appeared to be telling us that he agreed it would be wrong to drag the Crown into Parliament by having a Prorogation as political as that suggested by some of the Tory leadership candidates? Does he therefore agree that passing this motion merely puts into our Standing Orders for that particular date an insurance policy to prevent the more unscrupulous of those who are currently standing for the Tory leadership from doing precisely what they are threatening in hustings to do?

**Peter Grant:** The hon. Lady makes a very valid point. I think the more important point is that the motion would allow, on one particular day in two weeks’ time, the elected Members of this Parliament to decide what we will discuss. The Secretary of State and others have said that that would prevent the Government from putting their business on the Order Paper. The Government cannæ tell us what they want to be discussing on Monday, never mind in two weeks’ time! Given the stuff they have been using to pad out the agenda over the past several weeks, they can hardly claim that there is a backlog. Well, there is a backlog of massively important proposed legislation that needs to come through, but there is absolutely no sign of it.

I will tell you, Mr Speaker, what would be a democratic and constitutional outrage. It would be an outrage for any Government, either through deliberate malice or sheer incompetence, to plunge us into a disastrous no-deal Brexit against the interests of our four nations, against the will of Parliament, and now, since 23 May, quite clearly against the will of the people. It would be an outrage for the expressed will of 62% of the sovereign citizens of my nation to be cast aside as if they neither existed nor mattered. It would be an outrage if 3 million citizens on these islands saw their basic rights curtailed and undermined as a result of a flawed and corrupted referendum that they were banned from participating in.

All those outrages would pale into nothing, however, compared with the outrage if the first act of a Prime Minister, appointed in an election in which less than one quarter of 1% of the population was allowed to take part, was to abolish this Parliament and reinstate it only when it was too late for us to carry out the duty for which we were elected: the duty of pulling our four nations back from what everyone in this Chamber knows would be an economic and social catastrophe.

**Martin Docherty-Hughes** (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): The hon. Member for Wallasey (Ms Eagle) asked my hon. Friend a question about Prorogation. The last two times it has been used constitutionally—for instance, in the Commonwealth nation of Canada—has been to hide the utter incompetence of the elected Government who were about to lose office. Can my hon. Friend remind the House again that what the motion proposes is a constitutional norm of parliamentary procedure and that the only way to do it is to vote for the Opposition’s motion?

**Peter Grant:** Absolutely. I agree entirely. Of course, we were told by the hon. Member for St Albans (Mrs Main) that the motion is premature. I wonder if she could tell us on which future allocated Opposition day she would like the official Opposition to bring this motion forward, given that they were told last week that they have had their allocation for this Session and that there will not be another Opposition day.

**Mrs Main:** On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I have just been asked to nominate a day. Mr Speaker, you are always a friend of all the Back Benchers. It seems to me that there is a worry about a particular candidate that Opposition Members may or may not like the Order Paper to reflect. If there is a worry about having a choice of how we wish to leave the European Union, I am sure you, Mr Speaker, would find a way to ensure there was parliamentary time. At the moment, however, we do not know what it is we are voting to have a day for. It is a fear of one or two of the candidates. If their fears were to be recognised, I am absolutely certain you would facilitate a debate.

**Mr Speaker:** I always seek to facilitate the House and to ensure that the full range of opinion is expressed. These are matters of debate and, notwithstanding the sedulous efforts to entice me into contributing to it, I feel I must exercise a self-denying ordinance. The hon. Lady has made her own point in her own way, with alacrity.

**Peter Grant:** I say once again that it is not premature for the Opposition to have tabled the motion today. This is the last chance they have, and I, for one, am very grateful they have decided to take that chance. The reason that we need to give Parliament the chance, just once, to set the agenda is that the Government have shown no inclination whatever to do anything to prevent a no-deal Brexit.

Why would a no-deal Brexit be so bad? Let us look at what some of the key drivers of the UK economy have been saying recently. Sydney Nash, from the Society of Motor Manufacturers and Traders, said:

“For the automotive sector, no deal is simply not an option. Hearing politicians promote a no deal does not fill any of our companies with confidence nor does it fill international investors with confidence. Our strong desire is that no deal be taken off the table.”

Seamus Nevin, at Make UK—many Members will know it better by its previous name, the Engineering Employers Federation—said:

“Our members are quite blunt, they say that a no deal scenario would be nothing short of an act of economic vandalism”.

“
Tim Rycroft, at the Food and Drink Federation said:

“No deal is something our members are most unanimous about. 45% say no deal would lead to redundancies.”

Nick Van Westenholz, director of EU exit and international trade at the National Farmers Union, said:

“No Deal would be disastrous for some sectors....It is frankly worrying that we see it being put forward as a plausible scenario to leave without a deal in October.”

Those are not choice quotes from selected commentators that I have picked up over the last three or four years. All those things were said today, in this Parliament, in evidence to the Brexit Select Committee just over six hours ago. That is what these major economic drivers are saying right now. It is about time the Government and some of their Back Benchers were prepared to listen.

Steve Brine: I realise that the Scottish National party does not like to respect referendum results either north of the border or across the UK, but when those eminent witnesses were giving evidence to the Select Committee today, I have heard from others about that evidence and I share their view: I do not want a no deal, which is why I voted for a deal three times—what did the hon. Gentleman say to them about why he kept voting against the deal? That is what has put us in this position.

Peter Grant: I have enormous respect for the right hon. Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn), the Chair of the Exiting the European Union Committee, on which I serve, and I know that he would show latitude where possible, but it would be a bit much if Committee members starting taking questions from those giving evidence, as the hon. Gentleman suggested. I say this to him and some of his hon. Friends: if they want to throw out accusations about failing to respect the result of a referendum that meant that Scotland has to keep sending Members of Parliament to sit in the Palace of Westminster, doing that to an SNP MP, while they are delivering a speech in the Palace of Westminster, when we are only here because we do accept the result of that referendum, is not the most credible time for it. I have said often enough that I respect the right of the people to speak in a referendum. I also respect the right of the people to say that they want another go, and I not only expect but demand that the result of the 2016 referendum in my nation of sovereign citizens be respected, rather than simply laughed out of court time and again by the Conservative party.

We already know from previous work done by the Confederation of British Industry and others that the financial cost to Scotland of a no-deal Brexit is more than the entire amount we spend every year on our precious national health service. Up to 100,000 people could lose their jobs, although in this place, some people seem a lot more concerned about who is going to get one job than about who is going to lose the other 100,000.

There was a bit of protest from Conservative Members when I said that a no-deal Brexit was against the clearly expressed will of the people, but it is true. In a democracy, one of the key ways that we find out the will of the people is through the ballot box. For nearly three years, we knew that about 17.5 million people wanted to leave the EU, but none of us knew or wanted to assume what kind of Brexit they wanted. I cry shame on all those who had the arrogance to think that they knew what the 17.5 million people wanted.

We still do not know what Brexit they all want, but thanks to the EU elections on 23 May, we know what they do not want, because this time people who voted in 2016 to leave the European Union decisively rejected the parties whose manifestos consisted of a no-deal Brexit. This was the first time that people had ever been given the chance to turn out and vote decisively for a no-deal Brexit, and even those who voted leave avoided the no-deal parties in their millions: 34%—barely one in three—of leave voters supported the no-deal parties. Of the 17.4 million people who voted leave, 11.5 million refused to vote for hard, no-deal Brexit parties on 23 May.

Dr Whitford: Is it not also the case that the current Prime Minister went to the country in March 2017 with her approach, which was towards a hard Brexit, and ended up losing her majority and with a minority Government, so people had already expressed their will?

Peter Grant: My hon. Friend makes a very valid point. Unfortunately, on that occasion, as on too many occasions, the soon-to-be former Prime Minister was listening to nobody apart from her own reflection in the mirror. It is not even as though the Brexit party can claim that 11.5 million people wanted a no-deal Brexit but did not vote for it because they disagreed with some other aspect of the Brexit party’s policies, because it does not have any other policies for people to disagree with.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): I am sure that the hon. Gentleman, like me and the rest of the House, recalls the Prime Minister saying before the general election that she was being obstructed by Parliament in getting her deal. That was put to the public, and as we all know, she got her result from the public: she lost her majority. On another point that he made, like him, we have consulted employers, company owners and so forth and they want a deal, as I am sure he would agree.

Peter Grant: If we asked a lot of business leaders just now what their ideal option would be if they had a completely free choice, I think most would say, “Don’t leave.” Those who were pushing for us to accept the Prime Minister’s deal previously made it perfectly clear that that was because they thought it was either the Prime Minister’s deal or no deal. If they were presented with a choice of the Prime Minister’s Brexit or no Brexit, they might give a very different decision.

The people had the chance to vote for no deal and chose not to. We can no longer say that pursuing or being willing to allow a no-deal Brexit is the will of the people. The people spoke on 23 May just as firmly and decisively as they did in June 2016. Those who, for the last three years, have been telling us that we have to listen to what people said in June 2016 better start listening to what people said in May 2019, because it was not just about the failure of the no-deal Brexit parties to get anything like a majority of support. The parties who were unambiguous in saying that they were standing on a manifesto of “Stop Brexit”, without exception, had record-breaking successes. The SNP had our best ever European election result, as a result of which, I am proud to say, my good friend Alyn Smith is now the new leader of the European Free Alliance and is likely to become the vice-president of a group that has almost 50% more MEPs than the one that Mr Farage wants to lead. Plaid Cymru had its best ever European elections,
as did the Liberal Democrats and the Alliance party in Northern Ireland. The Greens managed only their second best ever, but it is 30 years since they were anywhere near the vote that they got this time. Meanwhile in Scotland, the Tories went into these elections telling people in Scotland to send a message to Nicola Sturgeon: I can confidently say that Nicola Sturgeon has got the message.

The purpose of today’s motion is to force the Government to do what any rational, sane and democracy-respecting Government would already have done. We are trying to force the Government to give Parliament a choice and give direction to a Government who are leaderless, rudderless, drifting and utterly lost. The motion is designed to give Parliament a chance to stop a no-deal Brexit, and to stop what would in effect be the non-military coup against Parliament that some would-be Prime Ministers are already openly advocating.

In January, in March and in April 2019, this Parliament voted to take no deal off the table. On 23 May, the people made it clear that they want no deal taken off the table. This morning, some of our most important industries pleaded with us to take no deal off the table. Our duty could not be clearer: whatever our individual views on the European Union might be, it is time to get no deal off the table, and we can start that process by supporting the motion today.

Mr Kenneth Clarke rose—

Mr Speaker: Oh! I had not anticipated the right hon. and learned Gentleman, but I call Mr Kenneth Clarke. May I just say that, notwithstanding the immense celebrity of the right hon. and learned Gentleman, I am hoping for very brief speeches, if possible?

3.35 pm

Mr Kenneth Clarke (Rushcliffe) (Con): Mr Speaker, I am sorry that I surprised you. I am not sure that I wrote in beforehand, but I shall endeavour to be brief. I intend to be brief because there are not many complicated issues here.

The first issue to which I want to respond is the procedural point that the Secretary of State wisely tried to retreat into, citing a few constitutional experts saying how outrageous it is for the House of Commons to try to take control of the Order Paper. Indeed, that very rarely happens but, with great respect to much more distinguished experts than me, such as Vernon Bogdanor, we have already demonstrated once that procedures already exist, which can be used—as they were by the right hon. Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper)—in very exceptional circumstances, for the House as a whole to take command of a day’s business. Of course, the reason it did not happen for many years is that most Governments have had a comfortable majority on every conceivable subject, so there was not the faintest prospect of their losing control of the Order Paper and nobody challenged them. However, we are in exceptional times and the precedent we have already created is a perfectly valuable one.

Sir William Cash: Will my right hon. and learned Friend give way?

Mr Clarke: I will when I have finished my first point.

This cannot bring down the Government. Of course, if the Government are defeated, it will be open to someone to bring a motion of confidence tomorrow. However, at present, the Government would carry a motion of confidence, so all we are doing—the majority of the House, if we do—is insisting that we want to bring some clarity to the present debate, and I would say some sanity. We want to give some reassurance to people in business up and down the country who are very worried and take the opportunity again to rule out the idea of leaving with no deal. We certainly want to rule out the idea of proroguing Parliament indefinitely, so that the Prime Minister of the day can run a semi-presidential system for a bit and put in place what he or she wants, without any parliamentary majority.

This is not a great threat to the constitutional foundations of the country. This does not actually threaten the future stability of Governments, and I am sure that, if we were in opposition, we would be supporting it without the slightest demur.

Sir William Cash: Will my right hon. and learned Friend give way?

Mr Clarke: I will give way, but I am about to finish the procedural point.

In fact, when we were in opposition, David Cameron asked me to chair a committee to advise him on a lot of constitutional issues—with Sir George Young and Andrew Tyrie, who have now moved on to the upper House, and others—and to make recommendations. We actually advocated, and David Cameron in opposition accepted, that we should give the House more control over the business of the House. We started, eventually, this business of the Backbench Business Committee determining the business of the House for a day.

In office, we took a slightly different perspective. I am afraid that was then reduced to the Backbench Business Committee producing harmless motions and the Government never voting on them, with only one-line Whips. In my opinion, one day, there might be a Government and a Parliament so adventurous as to contemplate giving more control to the House as a whole over its own business. However, this Parliament seems to prefer to get steadily weaker, rather than stronger, and I do not think that day has yet dawned. At this stage, as that is all I am going to say on the procedural point, I will give way.

Sir William Cash: On that procedural point, the reality is that Standing Order No. 14 gives precedence to Government business for very good reasons. It is in accordance with our constitutional conventions and the Standing Orders that the Government have a majority and that, in those circumstances—[Interruption.] They do. With the confidence and supply agreement with the DUP, we have a Government and that is the point. We have a Prime Minister. This motion does no more than open the door to the possibility that, by some permutation or other, there may be some argument about a Prorogation or, indeed, about no deal. But that is not what this motion is about; it is an open-door policy—nothing more or less.
Mr Clarke: Governments pursue policies for which they have a parliamentary majority. I am going to be brief, so I shall not widen what I think is the very important broader constitutional procedural field.

It is now argued by many people that this Parliament has no powers, really, except when it is passing legislation, and I think that that is what is contemplated here. Unless a statute is passed to change the law, the Government can regard motions in Parliament as a mere expression of opinion. I regard that as nonsense; I regard it as dangerous nonsense; and the sooner it is shot down the better. It has emerged in the last two or three years precisely because Parliament is fragmented: both parties are shattered on several policies, so people are trying again to get round the problems.

Parties form a Government when they can command a majority in a vote of confidence. They can then only pursue policies for which they have a majority in the House of Commons, and continue to have a majority in the House of Commons. It is preposterous to start reinterpretting our unwritten constitution on the basis that no one ever intended that the Government should have to abandon a policy on which it is defeated in the House of Commons. That is complete nonsense. The word the Government must do—because one of the candidates at least fears that she would be defeated if she pursued her policy—is to send Parliament away and have no Parliament at all. I think that I have already made clear, in an intervention, my views on the Prorogation point. I think that the sooner the House makes this clear, takes a day to make it clear and to make it illegal to contemplate doing that—and gives Parliament a role to stop it—the better.

Leaving with no deal has, as I recall, been ruled out with increasing majorities on the three occasions on which we have voted on it. With this mad debate going on in the country at the moment, it is obviously high time Parliament reasserted the fundamental basis of what is going on—that there is no majority in the House for no deal. Apart from those who defend the desirability of leaving with no deal, which no one has done in today’s debate so far, I cannot see why people are going to such lengths to resist that.

The Government’s policy, for which my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State speaks, is to oppose leaving with no deal. I agree with him that we can say to the Opposition, “Well, we had a deal and you would not let it go through.” I supported the Prime Minister’s latest attempt to surround that deal with suggestions that I think should have been supported by Opposition Members who agree with my hon. Friend and me on a soft Brexit. I have an eccentric view that they would have been supported.

We have all constantly been attending plotting meetings. I have attended meetings at which Labour Members were agreeing to vote for the Second Reading of that Bill. What we were plotting was what amendments we would pass to put in improvements and safeguards. That could have prospered, but I am afraid that the Prime Minister preferred to do all her dealings, all the way through, with the members of the European Research Group. She always made concessions to them and eventually they told her that she had to go, so she said she was resigning. So we are now in this position.

I personally believe—it may be an eccentric belief—that the Prime Minister could have secured a majority for the deal as she had finally modified it, in an attempt to get cross-party support. It is obvious that the deal that we all need will only be achieved by any Prime Minister when we face up to the need for cross-party support to get around the party divisions. Both parties must accept that a minority will rebel against any deal that comes forward, but we could probably get a majority of the House to vote down the Labour left and the Tory right and actually pass something that is in the national interest. That, I think, is the main objective that really lies behind today’s debate. To listen to all these arguments about why, for pedantic procedural and textual reasons, we should reject it, is, I am afraid, to take—not for the first time—a rather bizarre perspective on the huge and historic events in which we are involved. The House really has to take some control.

My final point is this. It might even improve the quality of the leadership debate that is going on in my party—and it needs to be improved—if we forced some reality into the exchanges between the extremely distinguished candidates who are vying for the privilege of being the next Prime Minister.

3.45 pm

Sir Vince Cable (Twickenham) (LD): It is a privilege to speak in this debate as one of the signatories to the motion, but I want to start by paying tribute to the right hon. Member for West Dorset (Sir Oliver Letwin), who has not just signed this motion but anticipated the potential threat to the country, and indeed the sovereignty of the House, from proroguing and has applied his mind to a procedure for stopping it. We should all be very grateful to him. Of course although today is an Opposition day, this motion is supported by seven different parties. I hope and expect that a significant number of Conservatives will support it, not because they share my view that we should be stopping Brexit, but because they are concerned about the sovereignty of Parliament and the consequences of no deal.

Fingers have been pointed at the right hon. Member for Esher and Walton (Dominic Raab), who is not present. He is probably not alone in advocating Prorogation as a solution to this problem, but actually he has done us a favour and we should be grateful to him for highlighting a risk that might not otherwise have been apparent. I believe the real risk here is that one of the mainstream leadership candidates, having made unqualified commitments to remove Britain from the EU by 31 October, encounters the same arithmetic as his predecessor and encounters the constraints of the withdrawal agreement and, to avoid the humiliation of the present Prime Minister, feels obliged to resort to drastic action. That is the risk that we face and I am grateful to the right hon. Member for West Dorset for starting a process of providing a necessary safety valve.

It has already been agreed that we do not want an extensive review of all the arguments for and against no deal. They have been endlessly rehearsed and we will get plenty of time to rehearse them again. But in the few minutes I want to take, it is worth drawing attention to a couple of recent developments that underline just how dangerous that concept is.

We have just had a visit from President Trump, who has reminded us about the instability of the world trading system. Those who advocate leaving without a deal place their faith in something called WTO rules. We now know that these WTO rules are worthless.
The President of the United States attaches as much value to the WTO as he does to the European Union. He wants to destroy it. He is undermining it. He is failing to provide judges to dispute panels, which no longer work. So WTO rules are not worth the paper they are written on. That is the world into which the extreme advocates of no deal want to plunge the United Kingdom.

The other point, which is highly topical, relates to the leadership competition within the Conservative party and the various fiscal bounties that are being offered to us. I suppose that, as an ageing pensioner on a high income, I should be deeply indebted to the right hon. Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson) for thinking about me when he formulated his tax policy, but actually he is one of several candidates who threatens to blow a very large hole in the Chancellor's provisions to deal with a no-deal Brexit.

It could be argued that the Chancellor is excessively conservative. None the less, he is sufficiently prudent to be aware that a no-deal Brexit will do significant harm to the economy and to fiscal receipts and that there has to be some reserve provision. However, we now enter a period of danger in which that reserve could well be blown on promised tax cuts. Among the many adverse consequences of a no-deal Brexit—not just those we are familiar with around the supply of drugs, the shock to trade and the impact on the economy—is a serious fiscal crisis leading in turn to currency devaluation and other economic consequences.

We will no doubt debate many times the consequences of no deal, but the risks are becoming more and more apparent. We should be grateful to those who anticipate those dangers and seek to prevent us from getting anywhere near them.

3.49 pm

Sir Oliver Letwin (West Dorset) (Con): I am delighted to follow the right hon. Member for Twickenham (Sir Vince Cable). Much that needed to be said has already been said, so I shall not tediously repeat it. I want to make two points that I do not think have been sufficiently brought out so far in the debate and that might influence hon. Members who are still undecided about how to vote in a few minutes’ time.

First, almost everyone who has spoken has agreed that it would be wrong for the UK to leave the EU without a deal, without Parliament having the chance for a decisive vote. We have no way of telling in advance how that vote would go, or whether Parliament would have an alternative. It has rightly been pointed out that without an alternative we could not prevent no deal from occurring, and it also is questionable whether there would be a majority for any alternative. However, almost everyone has agreed that we need to leave open the option for Parliament to make its mind up in such a decisive vote.

It has been pointed out repeatedly that one possible means of preventing such a vote is a Prorogation. I am indeed concerned about that, but I accept that we might be in luck and have a Prime Minister who does not seek to use that route. However, I want to draw hon. Members’ attention to a point that has not come out so far, which is that Prorogation is not by any means the only way in which an incoming Prime Minister who was determined to leave with or without a deal—as many have put it—could avoid having a decisive vote. They would not need to go to the lengths of Prorogation; in fact, they would not need to do anything. If they introduced nothing to the House of Commons to give us an opportunity for such a vote, the House would not, in the absence of this motion and what follows it, have any such opportunity.

Sir William Cash: My right hon. Friend has just referred to this motion “and what follows it”. This is a phantom motion about a phantom Bill. Will he illustrate exactly what we are meant to be talking about, as he did before, because a few months ago there were five Bills—we ended up with a No. 5 Bill? Will he please tell us what specific wording he would import into this motion if it were to be carried to the next stage?

Sir Oliver Letwin: I will not give way. I am sorry.

The point I am trying to make is that it is not necessary to prorogue to prevent a vote. The incoming Prime Minister would simply need to avoid taking any action. In those circumstances, we would leave on 31 October, and only after that would we need emergency legislation to catch up with the fact that we had left—

Sir William Cash rose—

Lady Hermon (North Down) (Ind) rose—

Sir Oliver Letwin: I will not give way. I am terribly sorry, but I promised Mr Speaker that I would be quick and I am going to be quick.

We would then all be forced to vote for that emergency legislation because we could not possibly leave the country exposed to the fact that it had left without a deal and without due legislative preparation. So it is perfectly possible for an incoming Prime Minister to avoid any decisive vote unless we force one, and that is the purpose of reserving the day.

My second point relates to that, and again I do not think it has fully come out in the debate so far. My right hon. Friend the Brexit Secretary has said that there is no reason to act now because there is no emergency—we are not facing immediate withdrawal without a deal, as we were when the right hon. Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper) and I put forward measures to prevent that and to ensure that we sought an extension—and of course he is right: we have until 31 October. That sounds like a long way away, but in parliamentary terms it is not. If we do not do these things now and on 25 June, and in the House of Lords thereafter, and if we do not have in place a process that leads to forcing a decisive vote in this House in early September on whatever the new Prime Minister puts forward, there will be no legislative time to do this, because the House traditionally sits for only two weeks in September and a couple of weeks in October.
That is well known to incoming Prime Ministers, and all the candidates are filled with sagacity and understanding of Parliament, so they will know perfectly well that they only have to occupy four weeks with doing nothing and we will be out. So, although it is not a fast-burning fuse, it is a bomb, and the fuse is already burning. If we do not put the fuse out now, we will not be able to disassemble the bomb in September or October.

Sir William Cash: Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Sir Oliver Letwin: I am terribly sorry, but I will not.

That is why it is wrong to say that this proposal is premature. It may be right or wrong to vote for this motion this evening, but it is the only time we are ever going to get, and I hope that my hon. Friends and Opposition Members who are wavering about whether to support it recognise that they will have to look back if they do not support it now. If we fail, as we may well do this afternoon, they will have to look back on that as the direct cause of, in all likelihood, our leaving on 31 October without a deal. It is because I do not wish to have that on my conscience that I have taken the uncomfortable step of signing a motion that has at the head of it the name of the Leader of the Opposition, whose party I do not follow and with whose policies I generally profoundly and radically disagree. However, this is an issue so important that it transcends party politics, and I owe it to my fellow countrymen to ensure that we do not descend into a no-deal exit without Parliament having had a decisive vote.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. I will apply at this point an informal limit of eight minutes on Back-Bench speeches, but I say to the next Member to speak that there is no obligation to speak up to that limit.

3.56 pm

Nick Boles (Grantham and Stamford) (Ind): Two groups of right hon. and hon. Members will be finding today’s vote especially difficult. Many friends on the Conservative Benches will feel torn between their loyalty to their party and their clear understanding of the national interest. I know as well as anyone the great strain that they may be feeling this afternoon. I, too, was an instinctive loyalist—someone who towed the party line, ambitious for high office. I did not see anything wrong in that, and on most questions, I still do not see anything wrong in it, and nor is there anything ignoble about the desire to stay on good terms with the members of one’s local party.

For each of us, however, there comes a moment and an issue that demands that we put such concerns to one side and do the uncomfortable thing, because we know that our constituents’ best interests demand it. I do not believe that any hon. Member with a concern for the welfare of sheep farmers or for people working in car factories will be able to look them in the eye after a no-deal Brexit has led to the decimation of Britain’s lamb exports and the destruction of thousands of highly skilled and well-paid manufacturing jobs. That is surely reason enough to support the motion today.

The other group for whom today’s vote is hard is Labour Members who represent constituencies that voted by a clear majority to leave the European Union. They feel that they are duty bound to ensure that the UK does leave the EU and are worried that a vote for today’s motion will be misrepresented as an attempt to block Brexit. My constituents voted the same way, and I feel the same obligation, but today’s motion does not block Brexit—not even close. Today’s motion would secure an opportunity to debate a Bill on 25 June, so that Parliament, as my right hon. Friend the Member for West Dorset (Sir Oliver Letwin) said, can vote in September on the new Prime Minister’s plan for Brexit.

Sir William Cash: The hon. Gentleman refers to a Bill, but he does not know what it will contain, or perhaps he does. Will he enlighten us? Does it not really attempt to unwind the repeal of the 1972 Act, in so far as it deals with the question of deal or no deal? That is what the law says.

Nick Boles: The right hon. Member for West Dorset answered that question very adequately. The Bill simply provides Parliament with an opportunity in September to vote on the new Prime Minister’s plan for Brexit so that we do not leave with a no-deal Brexit on 31 October, as the law currently provides, without Parliament having had a chance to vote.

If my old friends on the Conservative Benches, the true champions of one nation, and my new friends on the Labour Benches, the representatives of thousands of decent leave voters in the Midlands and the north, find a way to support today’s motion, much more than a day of the Order Paper will have been won: this House will have seized the chance to defend its rights and freedoms against an arrogant Executive hellbent on implementing an extreme policy; the British people will have been given the opportunity to slow their leaders’ lemming-like rush towards a no-deal Brexit; and the world will have been given reason to believe that the psychodrama of the Tory party’s leadership contest does not define us as a nation, that Britain has not taken leave of its senses and that the House of Commons is a place in which grown-ups come together to take responsibility for securing the future of our country.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. I remind the House of the informal limit of eight minutes. If it were breached, I would have to impose a stricter formal limit, and I hope not to have to do that.

4.1 pm

Sir William Cash (Stone) (Con): Basically, I have already described this as a phantom motion for a phantom Bill. We do not know what the Bill will contain. We have had various suggestions that it may contain some elements of what has been proposed by some of the so-called leadership candidates. I do not know what they will propose by the end of the process.

What I can say, however, is that this is, as I said earlier, an open-door motion. It opens the door for any Bill, of any kind, to take precedence over Government business, which is inconceivable as a matter of constitutional convention. I put it to the right hon. and learned Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer) that the reality is that there is not a single constitutional authority he could cite to disprove the proposition I have put not just once over the past six months to a year
on this very question, which is that our constitution operates on the basis of parliamentary government and not government by Parliament.

Dr Whitford: The hon. Gentleman has just said that he has no idea what a future Prime Minister will propose, which is exactly the point of this motion. A future Prime Minister could prorogue Parliament or, as the right hon. Member for West Dorset (Sir Oliver Letwin) pointed out, simply tie us up and do nothing. This motion would simply prevent either of those options.

Sir William Cash: I have great respect for the hon. Lady—she sits on my Committee, and I am happy that that should be the case—and I understand what she says, but, as I said earlier, the reality is that this is a phantom motion for a phantom Bill. The real objective is to unwind the provisions set out in article 50, which is supposed to operate according to our constitutional requirements and, subject only to an extension of exit day, provides for the repeal of the 1972 Act. That Act is part of our domestic legislation and prescribes that when we get to the end of the two-year period, that is it—subject only to an extension of exit day.

For practical purposes, there is no other way to interpret what may be in the pipeline. We all know that, and I do not know why we need to be coy. It is perfectly consistent, and I respect him for that. But the reality is that the House decided to abrogate its right to make those decisions. That was a deliberate choice taken by this Parliament, by six to one, to ensure that those people have the right to make that decision. That is the basis on which I rest my argument, because ultimately any attempt to bypass that raises the most dangerous questions relating to the nature of our democracy. We have had many warnings as to what might happen if this were to be unwound, and it is my concern that this phantom Bill will do just that, for the reasons that lie behind the right hon. Gentleman’s question and intervention. He does not want Brexit at all, and I said this on Second Reading of the withdrawal Bill; I did not believe that Members of this House who were pretending that they were prepared to allowed Brexit had any intention of allowing it to take place. That is what this is really all about.

I also take the gravest exception to what is being done by some Conservative colleagues who voted in line with the Government’s policy in the manifesto to pass enactments that led to our ending up with the withdrawal Act, which I happen to have drafted in its original form, early in 2016. To have that completely undermined and unwound by their reversing their votes is completely unacceptable. It is unacceptable for people to vote for a vast and important question of this kind and then to unroll it completely by subsequent manoeuvres, including the use of phantom motions and phantom Bills. I believe very strongly that that is unacceptable. It is completely inconsistent with our constitutional role as the mother of Parliaments. It is inconsistent with every single aspect of our constitutional conventions, and therefore as far as I am concerned the motion should not be passed.

It would be unwise—I will go further and say it would be a disgrace—for Members who voted for the withdrawal Act to turn around and say, “But we’re going to try to reverse it” on the basis of a Bill that does not even exist at the moment yet about which they have prattled on right the way through these proceedings.
4.10 pm

Gareth Snell (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab/Co-op): On the subject of phantom Bills, there is one that has haunted this subject for many years now and he has just had nine minutes of debate time, so I shall try to be brief.

First, I thank my Front-Bench colleagues, my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer) and my hon. Friend the Member for Darlington (Jenny Chapman), who has listened with distinction to every complaint I have had about the Labour party’s Brexit process over the past two years and has done so with good grace and a smile on her face, which is difficult when talking to me.

I very much enjoyed the speech by the hon. Member for Grantham and Stamford (Nick Boles). He said that representatives of constituencies like mine have to be able to look their constituents in the eye when it comes to manufacturing jobs and the viability of the traditional industries, but I fear we have already passed that point. I have been asked time and again by the British Ceramic Confederation and those in the ceramics industries to vote for a deal. They have asked me to vote for a deal so that they can make preparations for the future. Food manufacturers in my constituency have told me that they need me to make a decision so that we can get past stockpiling. They have told me time and again that they need a resolution.

Although I understand exactly what the hon. Gentleman said, I have not done it: on the three occasions when the opportunity presented itself to me, I have not voted for a deal. The most recent time, on 29 March, I followed my party line and would not support the deal that was put in front of me. I made a mistake: on that day I should have voted for a deal. I will now vote for a deal if one is brought forward, because it is inconceivable that we can continue with this line of debate in which we seek to make the decisions that we want to make and avoid making the decisions that we have to make.

I do not object to the content of the motion, but I will not be voting for it. I shall abstain and withhold my vote, but not because I believe that no deal is something we should play with or that no deal is acceptable. I have voted continually to prevent no deal—I have ruled it out and taken it off the table—but in doing so all I have actually done is make the table longer and put it further away. Delaying Brexit does not stop no deal being the ultimate default endpoint; it just pushes it further into the future.

We do not have a European Commission until 1 November, so any talk of renegotiation and future deals is completely pie in the sky. As many leadership candidates can talk about that as they wish, but by the point that the new Commission is available to endorse any changes, the date on which we exit will have passed. The choice that faces this House is not more parliamentary procedure and chicanery to quell our souls and let us feel we have no say. On that point, I am afraid that the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central is absolutely, wholly mistaken.

My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State produced a series of obfuscatory facts that entirely glossed over the reality, which is that the Government can control the Order Paper between now and 31 October in a way that allows them to take us out of the EU with no deal, if an incoming Prime Minister—my right hon. Friend is in no position to speak for them—chooses to do that. That is the reality facing the House.

Throughout this whole unhappy business of Brexit, I have tried to ensure a process that avoids chaos. I say this to my hon. Friends on the Conservative Benches: if we get to a point where a Prime Minister is intent on taking us out of the EU with no deal, the only way of stopping that Prime Minister will be to bring down their Government. I have to say here and now that I will not hesitate to do that, if that is attempted, even if it
means resigning the Whip and leaving the party. I will not allow this country to be taken out of the EU on a no-deal Brexit without the approval of this House, and without going back to the country and asking it if that is what it wants.

I desire the best for my party as a loyal member of it, and this is probably the last opportunity for a sensible way of influencing the outcome. Of course it is imperfect. The truth is that we need a hook on which to hang a Bill, so it was inevitable that the wording would be as it is today. There is no other way of doing this. It might be nicer if there were, but there is not. That, quite plainly, is the choice. I was elected Member of Parliament for Beaconsfield to represent my constituents’ interests. No deal is not in their interests, nor is there the smallest shred of evidence that there is a majority for that chaotic and appalling proposal, yet I have to face up to the fact that some people who wish to lead my party appear to believe that it is a viable option—indeed, appear to believe that they cannot become leader of the party if that is an option that they are not prepared to put forward. That is all part of a process, I am afraid, of further deceit, which is slowly swallowing up democracy in this country and the reputation of this House.

I shall support the motion. I disagree on most things with the Leader of the Opposition, and I disagree fundamentally with every tenet of his philosophical outlook, but this is the only opportunity we have. I will not say to my children and grandchildren, “When it came to it, I just decided to give up.” I will not do that.

4.19 pm

Ms Angela Eagle (Wallasey) (Lab): It is a great privilege to follow the right hon. and learned Member for Beaconsfield (Mr Grieve) and the speech he has just given. I fear that the trajectory of the entire Brexit debate since the referendum, with everything that has happened, is pushing us to the extremes of that debate, because we had a Prime Minister who simply did not bring the country back together, or seek to do so. She decided that the way through this conundrum was to appease the unappeasable Brextremists in her own party. It is hard to see whether there will be the kind of consensus and bringing back together of our fragmented country for which my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Gareth Snell) wishes.

I see us heading towards a final choice between no deal and revocation, but in the absence of that choice being before us today, the modest measure that we are debating gives us a chance as a Parliament to have an insurance policy against careering off into the catastrophe of no deal. A newly elected leader of the Conservative party with no democratic mandate from the country and no majority in Parliament might manipulate the way in which this House works to deny us the chance to express what we have already expressed clearly: there is no majority in this Parliament to take this country out of the European Union without a deal. To me, that is a modest proposal.

Lady Hermon: The Brexit Secretary studiously avoided questions about the Government’s commitment to the Good Friday agreement. Does the hon. Lady agree with me that taking this country out of Europe without a deal would have very serious consequences for Northern Ireland? Sinn Féin would certainly be incentivised to campaign for a border poll were there any hardening of the border, which would be inevitable with a no-deal Brexit. Heaven help us, but think what disabdissident republicans might do if there were to be no deal.

Ms Eagle: I agree with the hon. Lady. She is absolutely right to point out the Irish dimension of the entire debate. That many Conservatives seem willing to cast the Good Friday agreement into the flames has been an astonishing aspect of this debate.

Members of the Conservative party opposed to this modest insurance policy describe it as a constitutional outrage that this Parliament should seek to ensure that the country is not driven off the cliff of a catastrophic no-deal Brexit. In seeking to put aside one modest day of debate, to try to pass a Bill—which would need a majority in this House and to get through the House of Lords—to prevent that scenario, they suggest that we are somehow upending years of constitutional propriety.

I would listen to such self-serving arguments with far more patience had we not had a Government who have spent the past few years disregarding all sorts of constitutional propriety in how they have run this Parliament: gerrymandering the number of people on Select Committees, wilfully ignoring Opposition motions and finally refusing even to participate in votes, and being quite happy to ride roughshod over centuries of constitutional convention for their own aims. They then get themselves in a lather about the very modest motion that we are debating.

In the interests of the economic prosperity and security of this country, we have to prevent the Government party and any new Prime Minister behaving like a latter-day Charles I, seeking to govern without this Parliament. If we have to do that by using a modest Bill, that is the least we can do. There is no way, for the legitimacy of what we do in the future, that this Parliament must allow a Government without a majority and a new Prime Minister who does not have a direct electoral mandate to cause a no-deal Brexit without referring this back to the people.

There is only one way, in the end, of solving the constitutional issues facing us, and that is through either a general election or another referendum. In any case, it is the people who must decide how we go forward. We are not going to allow any newly elected leader of the Conservative party to take that decision away from the British people. That is why I support the very modest change before us today to put that insurance policy on to the statute book.

4.25 pm

Richard Harrington (Watford) (Con): I will be very brief, Mr Speaker, because, as you know, I am a simple sort of chap—I do not preoccupy myself with parliamentary procedure and I do not claim to be an expert on it. All I can say is that in my constituency of Watford people do not come up to me and say, “It’s an outrage to reverse the Order Paper on one day in Parliament.”

All I want in order to be able to oppose this motion today is someone from the Front Bench, or someone else, to tell me when I, as a Member of Parliament, can
stop two nonsenses: first, the dishonest and inappropriate method of using proroguing Parliament to stop me having a say on the Brexit situation; and secondly, no deal. If they will give me a time when that can take place between now and the end of October, I would be very delighted to oppose the Opposition motion today.

Mr Nicholas Brown (Newcastle upon Tyne East) (Lab) claimed to move the closure (Standing Order No. 36).

Question put forthwith, That the Question be now put. Question agreed to.

Main Question accordingly put.

The House divided: Ayes 298, Noes 309.

Division No. 420

AYES

- Cowan, Ronnie
- Coyle, Neil
- Creasy, Stella
- Cummins, Judith
- Cunningham, Alex
- Debbonaire, Thangam
- Dent Coad, Emma
- Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh
- Djonjog, Mr Jonathan
- Dodd, Anneliese
- Doughty, Stephen
- Dowd, Peter
- Dromey, Jack
- Duffield, Rosie
- Eagle, Ms Angela
- Eagle, Maria
- Edwards, Jonathan
- Ellen, Dame Louise
- Elmore, Chris
- Esterson, Bill
- Evans, Chris
- Farron, Tim
- Fellows, Marion
- Fletchett, Colleen
- Forbes, Lisa
- Fovargue, Yvonne
- Foxcroft, Vicky
- Frith, James
- Furniss, Gill
- Gapes, Mike
- Gardiner, Barry
- George, Ruth
- Gethins, Stephen
- Gibson, Patricia
- Gill, Preet Kaur
- Glindon, Mary
- Goddard, Mr Roger
- Goodman, Helen
- Grady, Patrick
- Grant, Peter
- Gray, Neil
- Green, Kate
- Greening, rh Justine
- Greenwood, Lilian
- Greenwood, Margaret
- Grieve, rh Mr Dominic
- Griffith, Nia
- Grogan, John
- Gwynne, Andrew
- Gyimah, Mr Sam
- Haigh, Louise
- Hamilton, Fabian
- Hanson, rh David
- Hardy, Emma
- Harman, rh Ms Harriet
- Harris, Carolyn
- Hayes, Helen
- Hayman, Sue
- Healey, rh John
- Hendrick, Sir Mark
- Hendry, Drew
- Hermon, Lady
- Hill, Mike
- Hillier, Meg
- Hobhouse, Wera
- Hodge, rh Dame Margaret
- Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
- Hollern, Kate
- Hosie, Stewart
- Howarth, rh Sir George
- Huq, Dr Rupa
- Jardine, Christine
- Jarvis, Dan
- Johnson, Diana
- Jones, Darren
- Jones, Gerald
- Jones, Graham P.
- Jones, Helen
- Jones, rh Mr Kevan
- Jones, Ruth
- Jones, Sarah
- Jones, Susan Elan
- Kane, Mike
- Kendall, Liz
- Khan, Afzal
- Killen, Ged
- Kinnock, Stephen
- Kyle, Peter
- Laird, Lesley
- Lake, Ben
- Lamb, rh Norman
- Lammy, rh Mr David
- Lawery, Ian
- Law, Chris
- Lee, Karen
- Lee, Dr Phillip
- Leslie, Mr Chris
- Letwin, rh Sir Oliver
- Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma
- Lewis, Clive
- Linden, David
- Lloyd, Stephen
- Lloyd, Tony
- Long Bailey, Rebecca
- Lucas, Caroline
- Lynch, Holly
- MacNeil, Angus Brendan
- Madders, Justin
- Mahmod, Mr Khalid
- Mahmod, Shabana
- Malhotra, Seema
- Martin, Sandy
- Maskell, Rachael
- Matheson, Christian
- Mc Nally, John
- McCabe, Steve
- McCarthy, Kerry
- McDonagh, Siobhain
- McDonald, Andy
- McDonald, Stewart Malcolm
- McDonald, Stuart C.
- McDonnell, rh John
- McFadden, rh Mr Pat
- McGinn, Conor
- McGovern, Alison
- Mclnnes, Liz
- McKinrell, Catherine
- McMorin, Anna
- Mearns, Ian
- Miliband, rh Edward
- Monaghan, Carol
- Moon, Mrs Madeleine
- Moran, Layla
- Morden, Jessica
- Morgan, Stephen
- Morris, Grahame
- Murray, Ian
- Nandy, Lisa
- Newlands, Gavin
- Norris, Alex
- O’Hara, Brendan
- Onurwah, Chi
- Osamor, Kate
- Owen, Albert
- Peacock, Stephannie
- Pearce, Teresa
- Pennycook, Matthew
- Perkins, Toby
- Phillips, Jess
- Phillipson, Bridget
- Pidcock, Laura
- Platt, Jo
- Pollard, Luke
- Pound, Stephen
- Powell, Lucy
- Qureshi, Yasmin
- Rashid, Faisal
- Rayner, Angela
- Reed, Mr Steve
- Rees, Christina
- Reeves, Elle
- Reeves, Rachel
- Reynolds, Emma (Proxy vote cast by Mr Pat McFadden)
- Reynolds, Jonathan
- Rimmer, Ms Marie
- Robinson, Mr Geoffrey
- Rodda, Matt
- Rowley, Danielle
- Ruan, Chris
- Russell-Moyle, Lloyd
- Ryan, rh Joan
- Sandbach, Antoinette
- Saville Roberts, rh Liz
- Shah, Naz
- Sharma, Mr Virendra
- Sheerman, Mr Barry
- Sheppard, Tommy
- Sherriff, Paula
- Shuker, Mr Gavin
- Sicles, Tulp (Proxy vote cast by Vicky Foxcroft)
NOES

Adams, Nigel
Afzal, Sir, Ali
Afriyie, Adam
Alcott, Peter
Allen, Lucy
Amess, Sir, David
Andrew, Stuart
Argar, Edward
Atkins, Victoria
Austin, Ian
Bacon, Mr, Richard
Badenoch, Mrs, Kemi
Baker, Mr, Steve
Baldwin, Salisbury
Barclay, Mr, Stephen
Barron, Mr, Sir, Kevin
Bellingham, Sir, Henry
Benyon, Mr, Richard
Beresford, Mr, Sir, Paul
Berry, Jake
Blackman, Bob
Blunt, Crispin
Bone, Mr, Peter
Bottomley, Sir, Peter
Bowie, Andrew
Bradley, Ben
Brady, Mr, Sir, Graham
Braverman, Suella
Breer, Jack
Bridgen, Andrew
Brine, Steve
Brokenshire, Mr, Sir, James
Bruce, Fiona
Buckland, Robert
Burghart, Alex
Burns, Conor
Burt, Mr, Sir, Alistair
Cairns, Mr, Alun
Campbell, Mr, Gregory
Campbell, Mr, Ronnie
Cartidge, James
Cash, Sir, William
Caulfield, Maria
Chalk, Alex

Turner, Karl
Twigg, Stephen
Twist, Liz
Umunna, Chuka
Vaz, Mr, Keith
Vaz, Valerie
Walker, Thelma
Watson, Tom
Westminister
Western, Matt
Whitehead, Dr, Alan
Whitfield, Martin
Whitford, Dr, Philippa
Williams, Hywel
Williams, Dr, Paul
Williamson, Chris
Wilson, Phil
Wishart, Pete
Wollastorn, Dr, Sarah
Woodcock, John
Yasin, Mohammad
Zeichner, Daniel

Chishti, Rehan
Chope, Mr, Sir, Christopher
Churchill, Jo
Clark, Colin
Clark, Mr, Greg
Clarke, Mr, Simon
Cleverly, James
Clifton-Brown, Mr, Sir, Geoffrey
Coffey, Dr, Therese
Costa, Alberto
Courts, Robert
Cox, Mr, Sir, Geoffroy
Crabb, Mr, Stephen
Crouch, Tracey
Davies, Chris
Davies, David T. C.
Davies, Glyn
Davies, Mims
Davies, Philip
Davies, Mr, Sir, David
Dinenage, Caroline
Docherty, Leo
Dodds, Mr, Nigel
Donaldson, Mr, Sir, Jeffrey M.
Donelan, Michelle
Dominy, Mrs, Nadine
Double, Mr, Steve
Dowden, Oliver
Doyle-Price, Jackie
Drax, Richard
Dudbridge, James
Duguid, David
Duncan, Mr, Sir, Alan
Duncan Smith, Mr, Sir
Dunne, Mr, Sir, Philip
Ellis, Michael
Ellwood, Mr, Sir, Tobias
Elphicke, Charlie
Eustice, George
Evans, Mr, Nigel
Evernett, Mr, Sir, David
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, Mr, Sir, Michael
Field, Mr, Mark

Fitzpatrick, Jim
Flinn, Mr, Caroline
Ford, Vicky
Foster, Kevin
Fox, Mr, Sir, David
Francois, Mr, Sir, Mark
Frazer, Lucy
Freamon, George
Freer, Mike
Fysh, Mr, Marcus
Gale, Mr, Sir, Roger
Garnier, Mark
Gauke, Mr, Sir, David
Ghani, Mr, Sir, Nusrat
Gibb, Mr, Nick
Gillan, Mr, Sir, David
Girvan, Paul
Glen, John
Goldsmith, Zac
Goodwill, Mr, Sir, Robert
Gove, Mr, Sir, Michael
Graham, Luke
Graham, Mr, Richard
Grant, Bill
Grant, Mr, Sir, Helen
Gray, James
Grayling, Mr, Chris
Green, Chris
Green, Mr, Sir, Damian
Griffiths, Andrew
Hair, Kirstene
Halfon, Mr, Robert
Hall, Luke
Hammood, Mr, Sir, Philip
Hammond, Mr, Stephen
Hancock, Mr, Matt
Hands, Mr, Greg
Harper, Mr, Sir, Mark
Harris, Rebecca
Harrison, Tim
Hart, Simon
Hayes, Sir, John
Heald, Mr, Sir, Oliver
Heappey, James
Heaton-Harris, Mr, Sir, Charles
Heaton-Jones, Mr, Peter
Henderson, Mr, Gordon
Heburn, Mr, Stephen
Herbert, Mr, Nick
Hinds, Mr, Sir, Damian
Hoare, Simon
Hoey, Kate
Hollingbery, George
Hollinrake, Kevin
Hollobone, Mr, Philip
Holloway, Adam
Howell, Mr, John
Huddleston, Nigel
Hughes, Eddie
Hunt, Mr, Sir, Jeremy
Hurd, Mr, Sir, Nick
Jack, Mr, Alister
James, Margot
Javid, Mr, Sir, Sajid
Jayawardena, Mr, Ranil
Jenkin, Sir, Bernard
Jenkins, Andrea
Jenrick, Robert
Johnson, Mr, Boris
Johnson, Dr, Caroline
Johnson, Mr, Gareth
Johnson, Mr, Joseph

Jones, Andrew
Jones, Mr, Sir, David
Jones, Mr, Sir, Marcus
Kawczynski, Daniel
Keegan, Gillian
Kennedy, Seema
Kerr, Stephen
Knight, Mr, Sir, Greg
Kwarteng, Kwasi
Lamont, John
Lancaster, Mr, Mark
Latham, Mrs, Pauline
Leadsom, Mr, Andrea
Lefroy, Jeremy
Leigh, Mr, Sir, Edward
Lewer, Andrew
Lewis, Mr, Sir, Brandon
Lewis, Mr, Sir, Ivan
Lewis, Mr, Sir, Julian
Liddell-Grainger, Mr, Ian
Lidington, Mr, Sir, David
Little, Mr, Sir, Pengelly
Lopez, Mr, Julia
Lopresti, Jack
Lord, Mr, Sir, Jonathan
Loughton, Tim
Mackinlay, Craig
Maclean, Rachel
Main, Mrs, Anne
Mak, Alan
Malthouse, Kit
Mann, John
Mann, Derek
Masterton, Paul
May, Mr, Sir, Theresa
Maynard, Paul
McLoughlin, Mr, Sir, Patrick
McPartland, Stephen
McVey, Mr, Sir, Chester
Menzies, Nick
Merriman, Huw
Metcalf, Stephen
Miller, Mr, Sir, Stephen
Milling, Amanda
Mills, Nigel
Milton, Mr, Sir, Anne
Mitchell, Mr, Sir, Andrew
Moore, Damien
Mordaunt, Mr, Penny
Morgan, Mr, Sir, Nicky
Morris, Anne Marie
Morris, David
Morris, Tom
Mundell, Mr, Sir, David
Murray, Mrs, Sheryll
Murrison, Mr, Sir, Dr, Andrew
Neill, Robert
Newton, Sarah
Nokes, Mr, Sir, Caroline
Norman, Jesse
O’Brien, Neil
Opperman, Guy
Paisley, Ian
Parish, Neil
Patel, Mr, Sir, Priti
Patterson, Mr, Sir, Owen
Pawsey, Mark
Penning, Mr, Sir, Mike
Penrose, John
Perry, Andrew
Philip, Chris
Pincher, Mr, Sir, Christopher
Inequality and Social Mobility

Mr Speaker: We now come to the second Opposition day motion in the name of the Leader of the Opposition. To move the motion, I call Margaret Greenwood.

[Interruption.] Perhaps the House can calm itself. A number of Members are engaged in no doubt stimulating and public-interest-focused discussions, but the said discussions could just as usefully take place outside the Chamber. No names, no pack drill, but I see a number of very senior denizens of the House thinking it proper to chatter a way in the Chamber. I am sure they know, say I playing for time, that the courteous thing to do is to sit attentively, as exemplified by our young friend in the Public Gallery who is a model of good conduct and to sit attentively, as exemplified by our young friend in the Public Gallery who is a model of good conduct and

Question accordingly negatived.

4.45 pm

Margaret Greenwood (Wirral West) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House notes the findings of the Institute for Fiscal Studies that the UK is second only to the US in terms of income inequality among the major world economies in Europe and North America, that the share of income going to the wealthiest one per cent of households has nearly tripled in the last four decades and that deaths from suicide and from drug and alcohol overdoses are rising among middle-aged people; further notes that 1.6 million food parcels were handed out by Trussell Trust food banks last year and that child poverty has increased by 500,000 since 2010; recognises that following the resignation of the entire Social Mobility Commission in November 2017 in protest against the Government’s inaction and a near year-long delay in appointing replacements, the new Commission has found that social mobility has stagnated for four years; considers that the Government’s programme of austerity has decimated social security and led to growing inequality of provision across education, health, social care and housing; further considers that the Government’s austerity programme has caused and continues to cause suffering to millions of people; and calls on the Government to end child poverty, to end the need for the use of food banks and to take urgent action to tackle rising inequality throughout the UK and increase investment in public services.

Levels of inequality in the UK are both shocking an unsustainable. The crisis in homelessness evident on our streets, the stark rise in food bank use and the millions of children growing up in poverty should sound alarm bells for this Government that something is deeply wrong. It should not have taken a debate in the House to get the Government to take note, yet sadly that is where we are today.

In December 2017, the chair of the Social Mobility Commission and all four board members, including a former Conservative Education Secretary, resigned over the lack of progress in tackling inequality. What an indictment of this Government’s social policy! It is the commission’s job to monitor progress towards improving social mobility in the UK and to promote social mobility in England. The chair, Lord Milburn, said in his resignation letter:

“Whole communities and parts of Britain are being left behind economically and hollowed out socially.”

He added that he saw little evidence of the Prime Minister’s rhetoric being translated into meaningful action. In 2018, the commission’s report confirmed that view, finding that social mobility had been stagnant for the past four years.
David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend, with whom I share a constituency border, for giving way. Does she agree that one thing we do not need at this time to tackle social mobility is a tax cut for those earning between £50,000 and £80,000 a year?

Margaret Greenwood: My right hon. Friend is absolutely spot on. I wholly agree.

Of course, it is not just the commission that is seriously concerned. In May, the Institute for Fiscal Studies launched a five-year study on equality, reflecting growing concern about the deep divisions within our society. In the same month, the final report by the UN special rapporteur for extreme poverty and human rights said that “key elements of the post-war ‘Beveridge social contract’ are being overturned” and highlighted that “British compassion has been replaced by a punitive, mean-spirited and often callous approach” by the Government. The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions has attacked what she called “the extraordinary political nature” of the report and the Chair of the Social Mobility Commission has brushed aside the evidence that Professor Alston presented—as if none of it mattered; as if the devastated communities and the lives of people ground down by poverty are of no concern. What sort of a Government are they who fail to see that the impact of their policies on people’s lives is always political? And what sort of a Government are they who can have such disregard for the suffering of their people? One of Professor Alston’s conclusions was that the “Government has remained determinedly in a state of denial” about the impact of their austerity policies. How right he is.

The next Labour Government will do things differently. Last Saturday, my colleague, the shadow Education Secretary, announced that Labour will create a new independent social justice commission to replace the current Social Mobility Commission. That is in line with the recommendation of the Education Committee, which called for a new commission to drive forward work across government to tackle social injustice. We believe that social justice is the right goal to pursue, rather than social mobility. Social mobility focuses on how easy it is for individuals to escape poverty. That is, of course, important, but it does not address the wider issue of tackling the causes of poverty and inequality. Our goal has to be the delivery of a fair and just society.

The Government’s own figures tell a shocking story. In 2017-18, 14 million people in the UK were living in poverty, 1 million higher than in 2010; 2 million pensioners were in poverty, 400,000 up on 2010; and 4.1 million children were growing up in poverty, an increase of half a million since 2010. Of course the impact of child poverty can continue throughout life. Children in poverty are more likely to die suddenly in infancy, to suffer acute infections and to experience mental ill health. The disadvantage they suffer can affect their progress at school or in work. By the age of 11, only 46% of pupils entitled to free school meals reach the standards expected for reading, writing and maths, compared with 68% of all other pupils. Only 16% of pupils on free school meals pass at least two A-levels—less than half as many as all other pupils.

Stephanie Peacock (Barnsley East) (Lab): Only 9% of kids on free school meals in Barnsley go on to university. Does my hon. Friend share my view that that is absolutely outrageous and that we need such things as the education maintenance allowance back under a Labour Government to change that?

Margaret Greenwood: My hon. Friend makes an absolutely crucial point and it is important that young people in Barnsley get the support that they need.

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): The most shocking statistic that I have heard since I have been in this House was when we did an inquiry with the UK Faculty of Public Health, which said that 1,400 children a year under the age of 15 die as a direct result of poverty. If it was the roof of a high school, we would be doing something about it.

Margaret Greenwood: The hon. Lady is absolutely right; she raises a shocking example and highlights the importance of this issue. We know that 4.1 million children growing up in poverty is leading to such disadvantage and we have talked about the mental ill health and the effects on children’s educational attainment.

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Margaret Greenwood: I will not give way any further, because a lot of people have put in to speak.

Even graduates who have been on free school meals earn 11% less than their peers five years after graduating. The Joseph Rowntree Foundation reported that 1.5 million people were living in destitution in 2017, including—shockingly—365,000 children.

The last Labour Government understood the importance of tackling child poverty and set statutory targets for reducing it based on household income, with a co-ordinated strategy across government that took 1.1 million children out of poverty. Despite that, the Government abolished those targets and only continued to publish figures for poverty at all after pressure from Labour and voluntary organisations. Will the Secretary of State assure us that the Government will wake up to the crisis in child poverty rather than wasting time by coming up with alternative criteria and trying to dispute the figures, as they have done so far?

We know from the Trussell Trust that Government policy has played a key role in the sharp rise in food bank use. In 2018-19, it distributed around 1.6 million emergency food parcels, of which nearly 600,000 went to children. Low incomes, delays in benefit payments and changes to benefits were the key reasons that people turned to the trust for help. It has made the link clear and changes to benefits were the key reasons that people turned to the trust for help. It has made the link clear and highlighted that the “key elements of the post-war ‘Beveridge social contract’ are being overturned”.

Leaving people to wait for over a month without any credit payment. It is absolutely right to do so.

John Redwood rose—

Margaret Greenwood: As I explained, I am short of time so, unfortunately, I am not going to give way.

Leaving people to wait for over a month without any income at all, when many may not have any savings, is simply callous, so will the Government end the five-week
wait? The Joseph Rowntree Foundation has identified cuts to social security, low pay and high housing costs as key reasons for rises in poverty since 2011. It has said that the benefits freeze, which affects 14 million people on low incomes, is the single biggest driver of rising poverty levels. By the time the freeze is due to end in April next year, the JRF estimates that it will have increased the number of people in poverty by 400,000, but of course, the cuts to social security did not begin or end with the benefits freeze alone. By 2020-21, the Government will be spending £36 billion less each year on working-age social security than they did in 2010.

Marsha De Cordova (Battersea) (Lab): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Margaret Greenwood: Apologies—I am short of time so I will not.

That lower spending includes a cut of £5 billion in support specifically for disabled people. The Institute for Fiscal Studies identified the two-child limit as a key reason for the increase in child poverty to a predicted 5.2 million by 2021-22. The Government must wake up to that reality and understand that as a country we have no option: child poverty must end.

When we consider social justice and disabled people, the picture is bleak. A report by the Social Metrics Commission shows that nearly half the 14 million people in poverty live in families with a disabled person, yet the basic disabled child element in universal credit is worth less than half that in child tax credits and there are no disability premiums. The equivalent support under universal credit for people who receive severe disability premium is around £180 a month lower than under legacy benefits.

Research by Scope demonstrates the inequality in living standards that disabled people face, driven by the additional costs that they face for essential goods and services. Social security support should ensure that disabled people can meet these costs and participate as fully as possible in wider society.

The Secretary of State said in a speech in March that she recognised that disabled people often feel on trial when claiming social security, yet she simply proposed merging personal independence payment and employment and support allowance assessments. The MS Society has likened that to “harnessing two donkeys to a farm cart and expecting it to transform into a race chariot.”

Will she commit to scrapping the existing system of assessments, and replace it with a supportive environment that responds to people’s needs?

The Government repeatedly say that work is the best route out of poverty, yet this is not borne out by the statistics. About two thirds of people living in poverty live in a working household. The UK is second only to the United States in income inequality among the major world economies in Europe and North America. An IFS study in May found that average chief executive officer pay among FTSE 100 companies in the UK in 2017 was a staggering 145 times higher than the average salary of the worker, up from 47 times higher in 1998. This points to a huge social injustice. It cannot be right that those at the top earn so much more than the vast majority of working people.

All too many people are trapped in low-paid, insecure work, unable to pay the bills. In 2018, in-work poverty increased faster than employment, and 4 million workers were in poverty, a rise of over 500,000 over five years. About 840,000 people are on zero-hour contracts in this country, and women and young people in particular are more likely to be in insecure work. Research by the TUC shows that only 12% of people on zero-hour contracts get sick pay, while 43% do not get holiday pay, and they have average hourly pay over £4 lower than those not on zero-hour contracts, yet this Government still refuse to ban zero-hour contracts.

To make matters worse, under this Government employment support is based on the punitive sanctions regime, despite the fact that there is no evidence that it leads to people finding work that lasts and lifts them out of poverty. Shockingly, over 1 million sanctions have been imposed on disabled people since 2010, but there has been little progress in closing the disability employment gap, which is currently at 30%. Are we meant to believe that disabled people deserve this treatment? Clearly, disabled people are being punished by this Government, rather than supported. Young people are more at risk of being sanctioned, but again there is a real question mark over the effectiveness of the employment support they are being offered through the youth obligation.

I now turn to the high cost of housing. It has long been assumed that younger generations coming through would do better than their parents, but that is no longer the case. Millennials are half as likely to own their own home by the age of 30 as baby boomers, and the Office for National Statistics has estimated that about a third of young adults were living with their parents in 2017. How can they forge their own futures and start families of their own in these circumstances?

This Government have decimated the provision of social rented homes. Since 2010, the number of new social rented homes has fallen by over 80%, and the number of people in the private rented sector has increased by over 1 million households. The evidence of a crisis in housing is all around us. Rough sleeping has more than doubled since 2010, and over 120,000 children are recorded as homeless in temporary accommodation. What kind of a start in life is that?

Research has shown that greater equality has a positive impact on wellbeing for all, yet in the UK we see widening inequality and lack of social justice having a devastating impact on individuals, families and communities. We see a failure of this Government to tackle the most serious social problems that successive Labour Governments have sought to address—poverty, homelessness, disadvantage and destitution. This Government’s austerity programme has decimated social security and led to inequality of provision across education, health, social care and housing.

There can be no excuses. We on these Benches call on the Government to end child poverty, invest in social housing and public services and take urgent action to tackle rising inequality and the suffering of millions.

4.58 pm

The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Amber Rudd): I am grateful to the Opposition for giving me the opportunity, on behalf of the Government, to talk about our commitment to reducing inequality and to improving social mobility.
I know I came into this House to help people improve their lives. In my experience, so did every single Member of Parliament sitting across this House. We do that every weekend in our surgeries in our constituencies, and we do that on whichever side of the House we sit—addressing different policies and trying to use the levers we have and the financial stability that we hope to have to improve the quality of people’s lives—because supporting social mobility, fighting poverty and giving people a chance is not distributed along party lines. That is why I always want to hear from colleagues who are fighting to improve people’s lives, from the vision of my right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr Duncan Smith), who introduced universal credit, to the tireless work of the right hon. Member for Birkenhead (Frank Field) in championing the most vulnerable in society.

Rushanara Ali (Bethnal Green and Bow) (Lab): When she came to office, the Secretary of State rightly delayed the two-child policy limit along with the universal credit roll-out, and she deserves credit for that. Does she agree that she should scrap that limit altogether to prevent millions of children from being forced into poverty? That would be one way in which she could honour the commitments that she is making today to tackle child poverty.

Amber Rudd: The hon. Lady must bear in mind the context in which some of those welfare reforms were made. The Government came to office in 2010, in the midst of an economic crisis. Reforms were needed, and if we had not made those reforms, the consequences for the national economy could have been so destabilising that they might have reduced the funds that are now available for us to spend on social security.

James Cartlidge (South Suffolk) (Con): What we also inherited was a welfare system in which dependency had been spread right across the income scales. What I encountered as an SME owner was employees deliberately taking action, through the tax system, to support social mobility, fighting poverty and giving people a chance is not distributed along party lines. That is why I always want to hear from colleagues who are fighting to improve people’s lives, from the vision of my right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr Duncan Smith), who introduced universal credit, to the tireless work of the right hon. Member for Birkenhead (Frank Field) in championing the most vulnerable in society.

Several hon. Members rose—

Amber Rudd: The hon. Lady must bear in mind the context in which some of those welfare reforms were made. The Government came to office in 2010, in the midst of an economic crisis. Reforms were needed, and if we had not made those reforms, the consequences for the national economy could have been so destabilising that they might have reduced the funds that are now available for us to spend on social security.

Amber Rudd: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. When people express concerns about universal credit, as they do sometimes, I often remind them of what it replaced: six different systems, two different places, annual assessments, and tax credits that were often incorrect. Our present system is about ensuring that it is accurate. Our present system is about ensuring that income inequality is reduced.

Several hon. Members rose—

Amber Rudd: If Members will forgive me, I shall make some progress, and then I will take some more interventions.

Let me talk for a moment about the Government’s record. The hon. Member for Wirral West (Margaret Greenwood) went on at some length about that, so let me make some points to her in reply. I will begin with our record on employment. We have helped more than 3.6 million people to enter work; we have reduced unemployment to its lowest level since the 1970s; we have supported nearly 1 million more disabled people into work, and women’s employment is now at record levels.

Those jobs are not just in London or the south-east; more than 60% of the employment growth since 2010 has taken place in other parts of the UK. Nor—I can already hear the suggestions coming at me from the Opposition Front Bench—are they just part-time and temporary jobs. The jobs that make up this increase are overwhelmingly full-time, permanent roles, giving people dignity and security of a regular pay packet. Behind every employment statistic is a person or family whose mental health, wellbeing and life chances are improved by participation in the workforce. This increased employment means that 660,000 fewer children are growing up in workless households, which makes them less likely to grow up in poverty.

Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): The Secretary of State will know that the number of food parcels distributed by Trussell Trust food banks increased by 19% last year. Does she recognise the close link between the growth of that problem and the roll-out, with its current flaws, of universal credit?

Amber Rudd: I know that the right hon. Gentleman has been very engaged in this subject. He will be aware that there are many reasons why people turn to food banks. There were some issues with the early roll-out of universal credit in terms of the timeliness of the payment. That has been corrected, and between 85% and 87% of recipients are now paid on time, which compares favourably with the previous legacy system.

Let me now talk for a few minutes about income inequality. Since coming to office, we have lifted 400,000 people out of absolute poverty. Another key fact that I can give in response to the Opposition motion is that household income inequality is lower now than it was in 2010. However, that is not enough for us; we need to build and do better.

Our safety net is one of the strongest in the world. We deliver the fourth most generous level of welfare support in the OECD. In this financial year, total welfare spending will be more than £220 billion. As has been acknowledged by the Institute for Fiscal Studies, thanks to the benefits system, overall income inequality has remained stable, even as earnings have increased for the most well paid. That is because we have what the IFS has described as a highly redistributive tax and welfare system. We have deliberately taken action, through the tax system, to ensure that income inequality is reduced.

Ged Killen (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Lab/Co-op): In my constituency, we have one of the top 100 least deprived postcode areas and just two miles down the road one of the top 100 most deprived postcode areas, where child poverty is heading towards 30%. What does the Secretary of State have to say to people living in that area, just two miles down the road from one of the least deprived areas, about income inequality?

Amber Rudd: I say to the hon. Gentleman that we recognise that there is more to do. I expect that those two areas have had the same differential for a long time, but this Government want to do more to narrow that and I will come on to some other proposals and examples of what we have put in place to try to improve that.
John Redwood: Will the Secretary of State confirm that there was a very sharp fall in real incomes at the end of Labour’s period in office, and the good news is that we are now above that old level and rising? Rising real incomes is the way to get people out of poverty.

Amber Rudd: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. It is now over a year that monthly increases in wages have exceeded inflation. That is the best way to get people out of poverty.

Several hon. Members rose—

Amber Rudd: I will make a little more progress and then take some more interventions.

I was referring to the information from the IFS that the hon. Member for Wirral West cited. It went on to say that household incomes are now more evenly distributed than 25 years ago. However, improving opportunities for those on the lowest incomes will always be a priority for a one nation Conservative Government.

Sarah Jones (Croydon Central) (Lab): About 1.3 million children living in poverty in this country at present are in the private rented sector. Many of them would be lifted out of poverty if we had more council housing, which is far cheaper to live in. Does the Secretary of State agree that we need council building again and to build more homes that are more affordable, so we can lift those children out of poverty?

Amber Rudd: I certainly agree with the hon. Lady that we need to do more to provide more housing for people on low incomes, and this Government are committed to ensuring that we do build more houses, that we make more available and that we make more houses available at prices within the local housing allowance, which has also been a challenge.

Jim McMahon (Oldham West and Royton) (Lab/Co-op): Is not the truth, however, that as well as the pound that people have in their pockets being worth less now than before, the social and economic contract of this country has been completely smashed apart? The idea that you roll up your sleeves and work hard you can get on in life and have a better life for you and your children is no longer true for millions of people in this country.

Amber Rudd: The hon. Gentleman paints a very bleak picture, but the facts that came out on Tuesday demonstrated that monthly incomes are rising faster than inflation. There are jobs being made available and inequality has started falling since 2010.

John Woodcock (Barrow and Furness) (Ind): The Secretary of State is being generous in giving way. Does she agree that, if the Government are sincere in wanting to accelerate progress in reducing poverty, it would be madness to advocate a tax priority of cutting income tax for those earning more than £50,000 a year? She must oppose that.

Amber Rudd: The tax cuts by this Government that I am most proud of are those that have taken the lowest paid out of tax altogether. Thirty million people have received a tax cut under this Government. We brought forward the threshold, which is now at £12,500, a year early to make that point and so that people on the lowest incomes do not pay tax at all.

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab) rose—

Amber Rudd: I am going to make some more progress. Let me set out how this Government are supporting social mobility and helping people to improve their lot. We know that social mobility support has the greatest potential at the earliest time in life. That is why we introduced 15 hours of free childcare for disadvantaged two-year-olds. This is on top of the 15 hours of free childcare offer for all three and four-year-olds, which we doubled to 30 hours for working parents. This is more provision of childcare than at any time under Labour.

We are investing in our world-class education system. Core funding for schools and high-needs education has risen from almost £41 billion in 2017-18 to £43.5 billion this year. Since 2010, the proportion of children in good or outstanding schools has risen from 66% to 85% in December 2018.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): We talk about help for childcare but, in actual fact, local authorities and childcare facility people are only getting £5 for every child, which is less than the cost. Surely the Secretary of State has to do something about that. Earlier, she mentioned the fact that wages were increasing, and they are, but they are increasing from a lower base because we have had 10 years of wage stagnation in this country. That has to be taken into account.

Amber Rudd: I gently remind the hon. Gentleman that we came in in 2010 to an economic crisis, and the fact that we have seen an increase in people’s wages over inflation in every month for the past 13 months is something that we should celebrate. The fact that we now provide 85% of assistance for people who need it for their childcare costs, compared with the 70% they received previously, should help people to access the work that they want and the support for childcare that they need.

We are also overhauling technical education, with investment of an extra £500 million a year once T-levels are fully rolled out. The UK has a long history of providing world-class university education. We have four of the 10 top universities in the world, more women than ever before are studying STEM—science, technology, engineering and maths—subjects at university, and disadvantaged 18-year-olds are now entering full-time universities at record rates.

For most people, full-time work is the best route out of poverty, so it is vital that we help welfare claimants to find jobs, to progress and to work. That is why the Government designed universal credit, which removes the legacy system’s disincentives to entering employment by ensuring that work always pays more than being on benefits.

Once fully rolled out, universal credit will cost £2.1 billion more per year than the system it replaced.

Ruth Cadbury: The Secretary of State talks about rising wages and full-time work, but is she aware just how many families depend on zero-hours, inconsistent and unsociable hours work while their costs, including rent and council tax, are rising? They are having to find childcare out of normal hours and they cannot make ends meet. Those people’s incomes are not improving, given all the other costs that they face.
Amber Rudd: The number of people on zero-hours contracts has started to fall. This Government are always going to respond to the changing labour market and to regulate to ensure that it works for people. It was this Government who made sure that no zero-hours contract employer could say that someone could have only one contract. We legislated against that, so that people could have more independence on zero-hours contracts.

The benefits of universal credit are that, because of the real-time information, people are given the correct support once they interact with their work coach and with their page, so I hope that they will see the benefit of that. We have built a welfare system fit for the 21st century that not only supports people in need but provides a springboard into work. Every extra hour worked is rewarded, and tailored work coach support helps claimants find the right job for their circumstances.

Marsha De Cordova: Will the Secretary of State give way?

Amber Rudd: Not just now.

I have heard success stories from people across the country who have been supported into their dream jobs through the hard work of my colleagues in jobcentres. I sometimes think that Opposition Members underestimate the great work that the work coaches do. When I go round and talk to them, they take very personally the assistance that they can give to individual members in hon. Members’ constituencies, the way they can signpost them to the additional help they can provide and the personal support that they give them. When I asked one of them recently what aspect of universal credit they would change, they replied, “Our reputation.” So many people talk down universal credit, but the person-to-person work that is done in the jobcentres is actually very sympathetic and constructive. We continue to roll out universal credit, and it will provide additional opportunities to people who access it. That is why the Joseph Rowntree Foundation has reported that universal credit is likely to help an extra 300,000 members of working families out of poverty, the majority of whom include someone who works part time.

I recognise that my Department, working with colleagues across the Government, must continue to open up new opportunities for workers as the labour market responds to automation and new forms of work, so we will face the challenges of a changing labour market head-on and continue to support everyone to thrive in work while of course providing support for those who cannot work. Indeed, under universal credit, 1 million disabled people will receive approximately £100 more per month than they did under the legacy system.

Marsha De Cordova: I thank the Secretary of State for giving way. She has mentioned disabled people and the fact that 1 million are better off, but does she agree that the abolition of the severe disability premium meant that a number of disabled people were left worse off? It was left to the courts to make a judgment stating that those disabled people were wrongly treated. Will she now commit to separating out the managed migration regulations to ensure that disabled people who lost out on the severe disability premium have their money back paid immediately?

Amber Rudd: The hon. Lady raises a good point. We are considering how best to respond, ensuring that we put the interests of the clients first. I also point out that we are spending £2 billion more on disabled people than was spent under the legacy system.¹

I will now say a few words, if I may, about health. Everyone in this House is proud of our health service. The Commonwealth Fund ranks the NHS as the best healthcare system globally. Our long-term plan for the NHS commits to tackle health inequalities, and we will target a higher share of funding towards areas with high health inequalities—worth over £1 billion by 2023-24.

Graham Stringer (Blackley and Broughton) (Lab): Professor Dame Sally Davies, the chief medical officer, drew attention in her most recent report to the fact that there has been no change in health inequalities, both regionally and by class, since the Black report was published in 1980. To go back to the right hon. Lady’s first point, that implicates all political parties over nearly 40 years for not having dealt with those inequalities. What does she think can be done about it?

Amber Rudd: Characteristically, the hon. Gentleman raises an important point. We know that different headwinds are at play here, and we know that social media is, in some respects, having a negative impact on health inequalities. My right hon. Friend the Health Secretary recently met with social media companies to see what can be done to control the harmful websites that are, for instance, part of the reason why we believe people may be committing suicide. My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary recently commissioned Dame Carol Black to review drug usage. Different things are going on here, but I reassure the hon. Gentleman that we are alive to wanting to improve health inequalities in this area, and we recognise that there is more to do.

We will set specific, measurable goals for narrowing discrepancies in health outcomes, and all local health systems will be expected to set out how they will reduce them in their area. That will ensure that we continue to provide world-class healthcare free at the point of use not just for this generation, but for generations to follow. As part of our long-term funding for the NHS, a five-year budget settlement will see funding grow by an average of 3.4% in real terms, because it is vital that anyone who suffers illness or cannot work knows that we stand ready to support them at times of need.

Jim McMahon: Will the Secretary of State give way on that point?

Amber Rudd: I want to make some more progress.

We continue to look for ways to help people out of poverty, which is why we have acted to increase the incomes of the poorest in society. My right hon. Friend the Chancellor has injected an extra £10 billion into universal credit since 2016, and that meant we could increase the universal credit work allowance by £1,000 in April, providing extra cash in the pockets of hard-working people in 2.4 million households.

Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): While we all accept that the Government have taken some steps—I pay tribute to the Secretary of State for making some changes to universal credit since she has taken office—does

¹[Official Report, 18 June 2019, Vol. 662, c. 3MC.]
she accept that the interventions from the Chancellor at the last Budget do not even make up for the cuts in the 2015 Budget?

Amber Rudd: The hon. Gentleman must acknowledge, as I said earlier, that we took on an economic crisis in 2010 that required some reduction in spending, and those changes allowed us to stabilise and grow the economy. There has now been an acknowledgment that some of that money can be put back, and I am pleased that the Chancellor was able to support us in doing that.

This Government introduced the national living wage, providing the biggest pay rise for workers in 20 years, and increased it this year to £8.21 an hour, and we have also increased the personal tax allowance to £12,500. We are acting to increase female employment and economic empowerment, reaching out to marginalised women and trying to eliminate the gender pay gap. We are spending billions to ensure that opportunity and growth are spread throughout the country through our stronger towns fund and our transport investments, but we will not stop there. We have committed to finding new and better ways to analyse and tackle poverty in this country.

The Social Metrics Commission’s “A new measure of poverty for the UK” report, which the hon. Member for Wirral West mentioned, makes a compelling case for why we should look at poverty more broadly to give a more detailed picture of who is poor, their experience of poverty and their future chances of remaining in poverty or falling into it. We are working with the commission and other experts in the field to develop new experimental statistics to measure poverty, which will be published in 2020 and, in the long run, could help us to target support more effectively. It is vital that we have evidence on the effects of poverty in order to tackle it, and in the run-up to the spending review we will examine what more can be done to address poverty, particularly child poverty, and to support social mobility.

Danielle Rowley (Midlothian) (Lab): I am interested in hearing more about how the Secretary of State, or her Department, plans to measure social mobility and poverty because often it is based on income, rather than wellbeing. Constituents who come to my surgeries week after week are fed up of hearing from the Government in the media that poverty is going down and employment is going up when they are in such desperate situations and are seeing no more money. They are going to food banks and having a terrible time. All they hear about is all the success the Government are having and it does not reflect their lives. So how will the Department reflect people’s lives in reality more accurately?

Amber Rudd: I know there are people who have difficulties, and I listen to people in my Hastings constituency. I try to make sure that we respond as a Government, and I try to help them individually, but the Government cannot just base policy on anecdotes. We also have to look at the statistics and there are many different ways of doing that.

The hon. Member for Wirral West may quote relative or absolute statistics, but it is important to have an agreed basis so that we know we are measuring the same thing. That is why I have said we will look at the Social Metrics Commission’s “A new measure of poverty for the UK” report, of which she may approve because it looks not just at people’s income but at their actual spending. That makes a huge difference to people on low incomes. I urge her to look at the report.

Jim McMahon: I appreciate the Secretary of State’s generosity in allowing an intervention again. In that spirit, is the Department having cross-departmental conversations on the impact of other taxation? VAT, the most regressive indirect taxation, and council tax, the most regressive direct taxation, take 8% of a lower-income family’s income. Surely there should be such conversations across the Government.

Amber Rudd: We always have conversations across the Government. I work very closely with my colleagues across the Government to ensure that we devise the best policies to help everybody on low incomes. Those people need our support.

Supporting those on the lowest incomes and making sure that people’s life chances are not determined by their background or gender is at the heart of a one nation Conservative Government. For as long as we lead this country, we will always put social mobility at the centre of what we do and prioritise those most in need of financial support.

We believe that good government can empower people with a hand up, not just a handout, to get a good education, enter work and earn a decent wage. We have sought to keep taxes as low as possible, particularly for those on low and middle incomes, so that these people can keep more of the money they work hard for. We are not complacent about the challenges faced by the lowest earners in this country, which is why we are entitled to free childcare earlier in their child’s life than anyone else. Our increased national living wage and work allowances ensure that, once people are in work, they now earn more than ever.

It is the Government who are improving the situation for families across Britain. I urge all colleagues to reject the motion.

5.23 pm

Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): I am grateful for the opportunity to take part in this important debate, and I thank the Opposition for moving the motion.

The IFS’s recent report, “Inequalities in the twenty-first century”, which partly prompted today’s motion and debate, states:

“Too often the debate takes place in silos, focusing on just one type of inequality, a specific alleged cause or a specific proposed solution.”

Indeed, looking back at debates in this House over the past few years—when we had the time to divert our attention from the Government’s Brexit shambles—there have been many discussions on issues such as changes to housing benefit, scrapping student nurse bursaries, freezing working-age benefits, the impact of the state pension changes on women born in the 1950s, income tax changes that disproportionately benefit those on the highest incomes, and universal credit, which in itself covers a plethora of issues that could be the focus of this debate—the two-child limit, the five-week wait or the cuts to disability premiums. Although Members can argue back and forth, as they have done and will again, about the merits and demerits of these individual policies and others, what connects these disparate issues is a
sense that the UK Government’s priorities are not geared to tackling inequality across these isles. The Secretary of State is right to say that we all came into politics to improve the lives of others, but we differ on the route to improving people’s lives. The evidence shows that the Government are not tackling burning injustices; they are fanning the flames with petrol.

This debate was originally scheduled for 22 May, which would have been apt as that was also the day when Philip Alston, the UN rapporteur on extreme poverty, released his final report on the impact of austerity and human rights in the UK. If anything, however, having the debate today makes it even timelier, given that the UK Government’s denial and abnegation of the report’s findings have been almost as concerning as the report itself. We must remember what Mr Alston actually said:

“The bottom line is that much of the glue that has held British society together since the Second World War has been deliberately removed and replaced with a harsh and uncaring ethos.”

It seems clear that, collated together, the issues I mentioned earlier, and others, have contributed to some of the stark reading contained in the rapporteur’s report. I hoped that, given the time that has now passed in which to reflect on Mr Alston’s findings, the Minister or the Government would offer a clearer outline of what the Government intend to do about the concerns raised, today or in the near future. Sadly, that has not been offered.

We contrast what we hear in the report about the UK Government’s issues with Mr Alston’s conclusions about the devolved Administrations. He said:

“Devolved administrations have tried to mitigate the worst impacts of austerity, despite experiencing significant reductions in block grant funding and constitutional limits on their ability to raise revenue. Scotland and Northern Ireland each report spending some £125 million per year to protect people from the worst impacts of austerity and, unlike the United Kingdom Government, the three devolved administrations all provide welfare funds for emergencies and hardships.

But mitigation comes at a price, and is not sustainable. The Scottish Government said it had reached the limit of what it can afford to mitigate, because every pound spent on offsetting cuts means reducing vital services.”

Those are Mr Alston’s conclusions.

So many factors can directly and indirectly determine a person’s life chances, including family income, status and health. Although Governments cannot override or entirely supersede all these factors, they can and must try to put in place measures that at the very least do not widen or exacerbate them. Unfortunately, the UK Government’s record in the areas that can determine this appears to show that many of their measures would appear to do just that. Page 6 of the IFS report shows that there has been a sharp rise in the incomes of the highest earners, with the incomes going to the top 1%—the richest in this country—now being 8% of the total incomes, which represents an increase from 3% in 1970. The average pay for a chief executive officer in a FTSE 100 company is now 145 times higher than that of the average worker in those same companies—increasing from 47 times higher in 1998—while household earnings have stagnated at the bottom end of the income distribution.

After adjusting for inflation, the lowest earning households today can earn little more than their counterparts did in the mid-1990s.

No one policy can end inequality or progress social mobility, which is why it is essential that all these areas—taxation, income distribution, social security, education, childcare and other policy areas—are looked at collectively and cognisance is taken of how interconnected and crucial a role they play in ensuring that future generations are more equal.

I wish, therefore, to focus on education, social security and tax changes, and policies directly about or impacting the state pension, as I believe that it is only by ensuring that those starting out have the opportunity to achieve all they can, that those who find themselves falling behind have a safety net that they can rely on and that those who have worked hard and contributed to the system throughout their lives are duly rewarded can we address inequality and stagnant social mobility.

Education is clearly key to tackling poverty, which is why the Scottish National party in government has made closing the attainment gap its absolutely priority. This has led to recent statistics showing a record high for school leavers going to positive destinations. For those who have chosen the destination of higher education, there are free tuition fees, which the Social Mobility Commission “State of the Nation” report acknowledges have “Contributed to the increased number of disadvantaged people attending university.”

However, for those who have chosen instead to enter the world of work straight from school, the UK Government’s age-discrimination policies in respect of national living wage entitlement make life more difficult, as many find themselves doing the same job as their colleagues but for far less pay.

The Scottish Government’s “Every child, every chance: tackling child poverty delivery plan” contains a detailed and ambitious plan for reducing child poverty rates and places education at the forefront of this effort by addressing some of the issues that directly and indirectly affect a child’s chances of getting the best start in life, through initiatives such as a new minimum school clothing grant payment to help low-income families to have more money for school uniforms and £1 million of new practical support for children who experience food insecurity during the school holidays. The Social Mobility Commission acknowledges that these plans are made more difficult in Scotland due to “UK-wide benefit changes”. It is to some of those changes that I shall now turn.

The 2015 Budget announced some of the most punitive cuts to social security in recent memory. We are now starting to see those cuts actively reverse previous reductions in child poverty. The Budget saw the removal of the ESA work-related activity group and the cuts to universal credit work allowances, and the introduction of the two-child policy and a harsher benefit cap, as well as the benefits freeze. The freezing of benefits has made it almost impossible for those already struggling the most to focus on long-term advancements and improvements in their job prospects, their life chances, or their family’s wellbeing. Instead, they have to focus on month-to-month survival, with no certainty about whether they will have enough for the bare essentials.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): My hon. Friend is making a good point. Does he agree with the Church of England analysis that a single parent with
three children who works 16 hours at the Government’s pretendy living wage would now need to work 45 hours just to make up the cuts from the two-child cap?

Neil Gray: I absolutely agree, and that is clearly impossible. Policies such as the two-child limit, on which my hon. Friend has been a doughty campaigner—she has led the campaign against that pernicious policy—affect the life chances of all members of the family. For the parents, it may mean increased focus only on finding the bare essentials, which for the children means less money and less time for sports, travelling, holidays, extracurricular activities and other factors that play an often unacknowledged or underplayed role in equipping children with the skills and experiences that will prove useful later in life. Often, the focus in these debates is solely on the income side of the equation, and less attention is given to those extracurricular activities and the often-ignored life-chances elements, but it is worth noting that the Child Poverty Action Group’s most recent report said that the removal of the two-child limit or the benefit freeze would be the best way to stop any increased rises in child poverty.

Housing costs have become the biggest worry for many up and down these isles, which is why the Scottish Government have embarked on an ambitious programme of council house building. Since 2007, some 86,000 affordable homes have been built and 59,000 homes have been built for social rent, and they are on course to reach their target of 50,000 in the lifetime of this Holyrood Parliament. The Scottish Government have also ensured that discretionary housing payments are available for those impacted by the bedroom tax and that the housing element of universal credit can be paid direct to the landlord. Although that is beneficial for those who choose that option, one problem I have been made aware of from recent casework is that when the landlord is the local authority, the Department for Work and Pensions takes no cognisance of when the rent is due to the council, meaning that housing payments are often made after the rent was due, leading to constituents being threatened with eviction proceedings by the landlord.

I have raised that issue previously and hope that Ministers will look into it.

If we look at those approaching retirement age, or who are already there, we see that the Government’s recent announcement of changes to pension credit entitlement mean that some couples could lose out on up to £7,000 a year, because if one partner is under 65 they will have to claim universal credit instead. The longest running issue in this policy area, and on which the Government have shown little sign of wishing to help, is that of women born in the 1950s and the delays and changes, with little or no notice, to their pension entitlement. The issue has been debated many times in the Chamber already, and I do not wish to go over that ground in any great detail, but such policies mean that inequality is being exacerbated for people at a time of their life when they are least able or likely to be able to rely on work or education to assist them. I hope that we will have a chance to discuss Mr Alston’s report in more detail, but it would have been remiss of me not to highlight some of the aspects I have raised today.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): On the Alston report, the UN special rapporteur spent exactly 11 days in the UK. Is that enough to get a clear picture of our country?

Neil Gray: I think it is; Mr Alston’s report was comprehensive and spoke to the issues that we see in our surgeries daily. I invite the hon. Lady to Glasgow, where Mr Alston spent much of his time, and to which he dedicated much of his report, to see the impact of the problems I mentioned.

Amber Rudd: Mr Alston, of course, spent two days in Scotland, to follow up on the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford). I refer the hon. Member for Airdrie and Shotts (Neil Gray) to the leader in The Times of 25 May, which said:

“The failings of Mr Alston’s report are legion.”

It referred to his report as “nonsense”, and said:

“The government is vulnerable to many criticisms in economic and welfare policy”—

a point that the hon. Gentleman often throws at me—“Yet poverty in this sense does not exist in Britain in the 21st century.”

I urge him to get a copy and read it later.

Neil Gray: The Secretary of State needs to look at the report and realise why Mr Alston was able to come to his conclusions on the evidence that he found during his visit to this country, rather than doing what she and her colleagues have done up to now: report personal attacks against a UN rapporteur who visited this country to draw conclusions about poverty and human rights.

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP) rose—

Neil Gray: I will take a last intervention.

Chris Stephens: I thank my hon. Friend for being most generous in giving way. Would he be surprised to hear that this morning, in the Select Committee on Work and Pensions, a Minister stated that the Department’s policy is now that it regrets the inflammatory language in its response to the rapporteur’s report and is taking that report seriously?

Neil Gray: I would be very interested to see the transcript, because that directly contradicts what the Secretary of State just did to me in her intervention. I would be very interested to see what was said in more detail.

There is no doubt but that the Institute for Fiscal Studies has blown a rather wide hole in the Tory rhetoric around inequality in the United Kingdom. Its report can be complemented by so many others—from the Trussell Trust, the Joseph Rowntree Foundation and the Child Poverty Action Group, to name just a few of the expert charities highlighting how the UK Government’s policies are impoverishing people across the UK. That is why we support the motion. I hope that the Government is wh y we support the motion. I hope that the Government will finally wake up to the social destruction that they are causing, will act, and will no longer take their path of austerity.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. As colleagues will see, a good number of them wish to speak in the debate, and there is a further debate after it, so I am imposing a six-minute time limit, of which I was able to warn Members.
5.37 pm

**Justine Greening** (Putney) (Con): The debate seems to pose a false choice to the House. We do not have to choose between a Britain with social justice and a Britain with social mobility, and the Leader of the Opposition is fundamentally wrong-headed to suggest that we do. It is disgraceful that a modern Labour party has sought to ditch the objective of our country achieving social mobility. Yes, people absolutely want a route out of poverty, but they also want a route up. There is no point in getting them out of poverty if, when they find the ladder to an improved life, they cannot climb up it.

I want to talk a little about how we can bring real system change to our country and how we can have more thoughtful solutions, instead of the politicisation of opportunity that I fear the Labour party is about to attempt. Social mobility has characterised my life. It is absolutely vital that this country makes the best use of its most important resource—its people. I care about that so much that I walked away from the Cabinet to focus, in my time as an MP, on my community and on driving and campaigning on this issue more broadly across our country.

The Opposition are patently wrong to attempt to portray social mobility as a narrow term that is about a gifted few making it to the top. That simply misunderstands any well-known or conventional definition of social mobility. Social mobility is about achieving equality for all and the system change—in our Government, politics and communities, and in corporate Britain—to facilitate that, with the underlying view that we will only do our best as a country when we unlock the talents of all our people, not just some.

I understand that Labour might want to criticise some policies, which is of course the practice of politics, but it is fundamentally wrong—I absolutely object to this—that in doing so the Opposition seek to ditch the entire objective of tackling weak social mobility in our country. That is plainly wrong and fundamentally anti-aspiration. The Labour party led by the right hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn) is simply engaged in prioritising class warfare over aspiration. That is absolutely wrong.

**Stewart Malcolm McDonald** (Glasgow South) (SNP): When the right hon. Lady was a Minister in the Conservative Government—a Cabinet Minister no less—why did they seek to close half the jobcentres in Glasgow, which would have reduced social mobility? The only one that we were able to save, by the way, was in my constituency, in Castlemilk, and that was four miles from the alternative jobcentre. How did that help aspiration at that point?

**Justine Greening**: The hon. Gentleman falls into the trap that many of us in this Chamber do: he focuses on inputs, but I want to focus on outcomes. The employment outcome for people is that unemployment has fallen dramatically. When we came into government, youth unemployment had risen by nearly 50%. Having the dignity of work and the opportunity to live a productive life are surely at the heart of how we have a socially just as well as a socially mobile Britain.

We need an evidence-driven systemic approach to get long-term change, and we need to shift away from this incessant debate about day-to-day policies. Yes, we need a welfare system that protects the vulnerable—of course we need a welfare system to provide a ladder out—but the challenges that Britain faces are manifold times more complex than that and need to be addressed in the round.

This House needs to understand that the solutions to unlocking social mobility do not lie only in this House or happen only through Whitehall. If throwing money at the problem had been the way to tackle it, when we came into office in 2010 unemployment would not have already risen dramatically, and schools would have already closed the attainment gap. In reality, however, the attainment gap has started to close since 2010, not before.

Labour needs to walk the talk, but its student fees proposal—scrapping tuition fees—is one of the most regressive redistributions of taxpayers’ money that I have seen proposed by any party in a long time. It would directly channel money to some of the young people in our country who have the best prospects ahead of them and are likely to have had the best starts. I find it bewildering that a Labour party that talks about social justice can think that that is somehow a step in the right direction.

This Government took crucial steps to improve technical education, after years and years of a lack of strategy—frankly, from any previous Government. People want real change on the ground—system change. That is why the Social Mobility Pledge, which I set up, now works with hundreds of companies to improve, I hope, opportunity for millions of young people over time. Communities therefore need to be more involved in opportunity areas—again, that is system change genuinely to improve lives on the ground. I had the privilege of meeting the Bradford Opportunity Area team last week. They were quite keen, of course, to see this Government support the work that is going on there beyond 2020.

It is important that our politics changes. If this House cannot work together on long-term policy change and focus on what it has consensus on—if it is simply arguing about where the divisions lie—we should not be surprised if we have not collectively managed to deliver social mobility for this country.

5.45 pm

**Emma Hardy** (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab): In thinking about the best way to present my argument in this debate, I decided on the idea of doing a “compare and contrast” by talking about someone who matters significantly to me—in fact, one of the people who has had the greatest influence on my life. I would like to take a bit of time to tell you about my grandma—my nan—who on Saturday turned 90 years old. She is an incredible woman who benefited from the Social Mobility Pledge, which I set up, now works with hundreds of companies to improve, I hope, opportunity for millions of young people over time. Communities therefore need to be more involved in opportunity areas—again, that is system change genuinely to improve lives on the ground. I had the privilege of meeting the Bradford Opportunity Area team last week. They were quite keen, of course, to see this Government support the work that is going on there beyond 2020.

It is important that our politics changes. If this House cannot work together on long-term policy change and focus on what it has consensus on—if it is simply arguing about where the divisions lie—we should not be surprised if we have not collectively managed to deliver social mobility for this country.

My nan benefited from having a secure house. She was moved into council housing when the new town was being built. She told me how the family moved in with orange boxes because they did not have any money for furniture, and that is what they used until they were able to buy some. When I was younger, she gave me the...
you need that, here you go.” In return, my nan has
state. I want to give back that promise and say, “When
happen—life happens—and they need help from the
whom, then, through no fault of their own, things
promise to people like my nan who work hard and to
we are no longer giving them the answers that we
Europe, as people move away from centre parties because
can see it in the rise of populism and the far right across
we are at our peril the way that this is breaking down the fabric
broken. Every single one of us in this place underestimates
brother generation—“You work hard, and when you need it
brilliant. She will still argue with anyone who knocks on
surviving now. She is still opinionated and she is still
She was a second world war survivor and she is still
able to socialise, all for free, all provided by the state.
found herself—obviously, after having cancer and becoming
She benefited from community education when she
She was treated with respect; she was not humiliated.
the test. The doctor’s note was enough to say that she was
to recover from it, the operation left her disabled, but
were not rich, but they were not poor either. When my
were not rich, but they were not poor either. When my
benefits system and the safety net that was there, to
As politicians, it is our job to create a society where there are opportunities at
every stage of life for as many people as possible. By
doing so, we will not only help individuals but stop wasting the potential in our country.
All my friends who I grew up with back in Liverpool
had just as much potential as those I have met at the top
of business, and now in politics, yet many of them were
denied opportunity. In my experience, education and
training are the key to unlocking that potential. I grew
up in Huyton near Liverpool in the ‘80s. My grandad
was a miner. My nan—who sounds very much like the
grandmother of the hon. Member for Kingston upon
Hull West and Hessle (Emma Hardy)—worked in a
biscuit factory, and my other nan was a dinner lady. My
mum and dad grew up in council houses. I went to the
local—unfortunately failing—comprehensive school, which
I left aged 16, as there was nowhere in the whole
borough to do A-levels. Opportunity came for me in the
form of an apprenticeship in a car factory. Little did I
know at the time that that first step on the ladder was a
brilliant opportunity that would launch my subsequent
30-year business career.
Even before a child is born, inequality exists. According
to the Social Mobility Commission, by the age of five,
48% of children who are on free school meals achieve
poor levels of attainment compared with those from
better-off families. That does not have to be the case.
Chichester Nursery in my constituency is excellent at
supporting children who come from disadvantaged
backgrounds. The maintained nursery has a children
and family centre that works with the families. When I
visited, I was blown away by the diversity of activities
on offer, all aiming to develop both physical and mental
agility, such as woodwork, cookery and computer
technology.
School is a crucial time for those looking to improve
their life chances, and children must have access to a
good-quality education, so I am pleased that since
2010 there are now 1.9 million more children in good or
outstanding schools. I did not get that opportunity, but
I am glad that many more do today. Chichester exceeds
the national average for attainment at key stage 4 and
A-level, as a result of the hard work and dedication of
teachers all the way from early years to secondary
school. Even when schools are performing well, we can
raised five kids, with nine grandchildren, eight great-
grandchildren and more on the way. We will all be there
to celebrate her 90th birthday.
In my final minute, I would like to thank my nana
and every other nana out there who instils in their
children, their grandchildren and their great-grandchildren
those values and respect for the elderly. I want to
promise every nana out there and my nana that, for as
long as I am here, I will fight with the Labour party for
a Labour Government who give people like my nana
the respect and dignity that everybody deserves.

5.50 pm

Gillian Keegan (Chichester) (Con): I believe that every
Member in this place—on both sides of the House, in
every party—came here wanting to reduce inequality
and boost social mobility. At the most basic level, there
will always be inequality. There is no controlling where
we are born, which country we open our eyes in and
under what circumstances. Some people start with
opportunity, but many do not. As politicians, it is our
job to create a society where there are opportunities at
every stage of life for as many people as possible. By
doing so, we will not only help individuals but stop wasting the potential in our country.
All my friends who I grew up with back in Liverpool
had just as much potential as those I have met at the top
of business, and now in politics, yet many of them were
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Hull West and Hessle (Emma Hardy)—worked in a
biscuit factory, and my other nan was a dinner lady. My
mum and dad grew up in council houses. I went to the
local—unfortunately failing—comprehensive school, which
I left aged 16, as there was nowhere in the whole
borough to do A-levels. Opportunity came for me in the
form of an apprenticeship in a car factory. Little did I
know at the time that that first step on the ladder was a
brilliant opportunity that would launch my subsequent
30-year business career.
Even before a child is born, inequality exists. According
all think of examples when, for one reason or another, education gets disrupted. That can be because of bullying, illness or bereavement. Sometimes people miss out on their first chance, and we need to create a network of chances, so that people can always get a second and third shot.

University often provides an opportunity for people to become more socially mobile. Today, there are more people from disadvantaged backgrounds going to university than ever before. None of my friends or I got that opportunity, but many of their children do. Chichester University is a great example. It works incredibly hard to be an attractive option for people who do not know anyone who has been to university and do not come from that background—people like me, if I had got that chance. It offers all kinds of courses and gives people advice and guidance, to prepare them for a smooth transition to university. It is doing a fantastic job.

Apprenticeships are another brilliant way to develop relevant skills. They are really needed for the workplace, because they allow people to implement, the very next day, in a practical environment what they learned in the classroom. They also ensure that whatever someone studies is relevant to the workplace, which is a problem in the university sector. The Government have an excellent record of developing and promoting apprenticeships. My focus, as an apprentice ambassador and co-chair of the all-party parliamentary group on apprenticeships, is to make sure that we build on that, that the programmes we offer are of the highest quality and that people can go on up the qualification levels.

This year, I have been very lucky to have an intern, Hillary Juma, from Mr Speaker’s internship programme, which opens up Parliament to people from disadvantaged backgrounds. During her time with me, Hillary explained that most people who live on her council estate are often in lower-paid, lower-skilled jobs, but there is no shortage of aspiration. She said that her experience on the scheme has opened doors for her and I am delighted that she is now off to work in the civil service. Hillary told me that anyone from her estate who makes it gets called “a star in the hood”, and I know that she is well on the way to becoming one. Hillary will be a future role model for others from her estate, and that is so important in encouraging social mobility.

Social mobility is about giving people chances in life. It is much better if that is done earlier in life, but if for some reason the opportunity has been missed, it is never too late to improve life opportunities and learn new skills in an ever-changing world. We as a Government must be sure that the opportunities we develop through apprenticeships and further education are properly funded and available all the way through a person’s life, so that we can all fulfil our potential.

5.56 pm

Judith Cummins (Bradford South) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow my friend the hon. Member for Chichester (Gillian Keegan). My constituency ranks bottom—533rd out of 533—of all English constituencies—for school-age social mobility. Put simply, anyone growing up in Bradford South has far fewer opportunities than someone growing up in a wealthier area. Rather than just talking about social mobility in a narrow sense, I want to look more closely at how opportunity is distributed in this country. I believe that it is a structural problem that requires a structural response.

Ultimately, the key to improving life chances for everyone is to redistribute opportunity more equally. At the moment, some people and some places have more opportunities than others—opportunities to go to an outstanding school, to get into the best universities, to access high-paying jobs. This must change.

In the short time I have, I want to focus on three areas: first, how we can empower schools to improve life chances; secondly, the role and future of the Government’s opportunity areas scheme, particularly in Bradford; and finally, the vital role that further education has to play in redistributing opportunity.

I would like to start, as other hon. Members have, by commending the Social Mobility Commission for its excellent recent “State of the Nation” report, which breaks down in forensic detail the scale of the problem we face. I was pleased to attend a meeting between the APPG on social mobility, chaired by my hon. Friend the Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders), and the commission. The commission rightly points out that schools are an essential vehicle for social mobility. In fact, I would go as far as to say that schools are the essential vehicle for social mobility. Good schools, as many of us know, can turn a child’s life around and open up opportunities they never had before.

We need to empower schools to do more to improve social justice. Of course, this is partly about funding. Education cuts do not fall on children equally. We know that cuts to support staff, after-school activities and targeted interventions impact disproportionately on disadvantaged children. I am concerned about the number of children who arrive at my primary schools with severely delayed speech and language skills. Headteachers across my constituency have raised that issue with me, and I recently met the children’s communication charity, I CAN, to discuss solutions. I CAN has developed a 10-week programme aimed at four, five and six-year-olds to deliver a language boost, and it is targeted at disadvantaged children. In the current funding climate, schools will struggle to fund such vital schemes.

I now turn to the opportunity areas programme, the Government’s place-based social mobility programme, which is targeted at 12 social mobility cold spots, including Bradford. In Bradford, the scheme is focused on improving the quality of teaching, improving literacy and oracy, and widening access to good jobs. While it is too soon to evaluate properly the success of the Bradford opportunity area, I would like to make a few points. We need clearer information about where the money is being spent. I am concerned that it does not always reach the communities, including those I represent, that need it most. If such schemes are to be successful, they must be open and accountable, including to Members of Parliament, and run over at least five years, with early and regular evaluation so that we can see their real impact.

The Government should also expand cross-departmental working in opportunity areas to include the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy and the Department for Work and Pensions. Finally, we need clarity, which I hope the Minister can provide today, about whether the Government intend to continue with the opportunity areas programme beyond 2020. People in my constituency deserve a clear answer on that.
Further education colleges take on an increasing proportion of our disadvantaged young people for their post-16 education at a time when they face severe funding shortfalls. Those Government funding cuts, coupled with an historical debt, has led Bradford College, my local college, to propose making over 130 redundancies in a workforce of around 850. That cannot be right. The Government must increase per-student funding for 16-19 education, reintroduce the education maintenance allowance and consider a student premium for disadvantaged students in FE.

A child growing up in Bradford South should have as many life chances and opportunities as a child from the wealthiest parts of the country. It cannot be acceptable that some children are born more equal than others. That will not be solved by any one policy alone. We need a wholesale response to bring about structural change to redistribute opportunity.

6.1 pm

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): I was not going to speak in today’s debate, but I thought I should because I am getting frustrated by some of the rewriting of history and the pretence that somehow there was a world of milk and honey under the last Labour Government. I will make a few brief points and tell a few brief stories.

In 2005, I was taking a break from work. I had three small children and I chaired the community pre-school, which was a lifeline for many working families in my local community. One day, one of the best members of staff came to see me in tears. Her partner had left her and she had to give up her job, which she loved, because she could not afford to work anymore—she was better off on benefits. The Labour Government did not give people opportunities, but trapped them on benefits. I also remember, during the 2005 general election campaign, mums coming to see me, again in tears, because they had been massively overpaid working tax credits by an incompetent Government that could not manage a benefits system. They were asked for that money back, which drove them into debt and desperation.

I remember the last Labour Government’s legacy. We were left with a crash. When an economy crashes, it is young people who suffer. A million 18 to 25-year-olds were not in employment, education or training. That was the Labour legacy for young people: a million of them left on the dust heap without opportunity.

Look at the position now. Unemployment among young people has halved. More women are in work than ever before. Real wages are rising and there is more money in people’s pockets because we have taken more people out of paying tax and given more people the ability to drive their cars and get to work without extra petrol taxes. People have £6,000 more in their pockets, and Labour voted against that.

Yes, there is more to do. I want to do more about the gender pay gap, but thank goodness—and thanks to my right hon. Friend the Member for Putney (Justine Greening)—we have gender pay reporting so we know how big the gap is.

I would like to do more for women in their 50s and 60s. Secretary of State, just a personal story: on my way into work this morning I had, for the first time, the experience of a hot flush. Men—thank goodness you do not menopause. We need to do more for women in their 50s and 60s, because the skills we need today are not going to be the skills we need tomorrow. We are living in a digital revolution. We are living in the fourth industrial revolution. The lives our children will be facing will be very different from the ones we have experienced. The jobs that people are doing right now will not be the same jobs that they will be doing in five and 10 years’ time. So let us not hark back to a history that did not actually exist, but look forward to the future.

6.5 pm

Preet Kaur Gill (Birmingham, Edgbaston) (Lab/Co-op): Almost three years ago, the Prime Minister stood on the steps of Downing Street and told us that she would fight a number of burning injustices. After almost three years, let us see how she has done.

The Prime Minister told us that if you are born poor, you will die on average nine years earlier than others.

The Prime Minister told us that if you are born poor, you will die on average nine years earlier than others. Last year, researchers from Imperial College found that children from lower socio-economic backgrounds are two-and-a-half times more likely to die before they reach adulthood than their peers from affluent families. We know that the Government are not addressing these inequalities. The Fabian Society found that the Government now provide more support through benefits and tax reliefs to the richest fifth of non-retired households than to the poorest fifth. The IFS estimated that more than 5 million will be living in poverty by 2022.

The Prime Minister told us that if you are black, you are treated more harshly by the criminal justice system than if you are white. In 2017-18, there were three stop and searches for every 1,000 white people, compared with 29 stop and searches for every 1,000 black people, and black people were over three times as likely to be arrested as white people.

The Prime Minister said that if you are a white working class boy, you are less likely than anybody else in Britain to go to university. The Higher Education Statistics Agency data show that the number of white boys attending university fell by almost 8,000 between 2014-15 and 2017-18. Earlier this year, a National Education Opportunities Network report found that more than half of England’s universities have fewer than 5% of white students in their intakes from a lower socio-economic background. As well as raising tuition fees as part of their coalition with the Liberal Democrats, since 2010, the Government have decided to provide more financial support for the richest 20% of households than the poorest 20%, according to research by the Fabian Society. The Prime Minister told us that if you are at a state school, you are less likely to reach the top professions than if you are educated privately. Only about 6% of the UK’s school population attend private schools and the families accessing private education are highly concentrated among the affluent, but those who did attend make up 51% of leading journalists, 74% of judges, almost 30% of Members of Parliament and 70% of the current Conservative leadership candidates. Attainment earlier on in life is also unequal. In 2018, the proportion of private school students achieving A’s and As at A-level
was 48%, compared with a national average of 26%, while at GCSEs at A or grade seven or above, the respective figures were 63% and 23%.

The Prime Minister told us that if you are a woman, you will earn less than a man. In the Cabinet Office, where the Government Equalities Office sits, there is a reported pay gap of 10.7% in favour of men. That is a higher gender pay gap than the public administration sector average, but it is not alone among Departments: in the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy; the gap is at 14%; in the Department for Exiting the European Union; it is 14.5%; and in the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, it is 22.9%. In 2019, the BBC found that fewer than half the UK’s biggest employers have narrowed their gender pay gap.

The Prime Minister told us that if you suffer from mental health problems, there is not enough help to hand. A Public Accounts Committee report from earlier this year found that children and young people are being turned away from NHS services because their condition is not considered severe enough to warrant access to overstretched services. This is due to the lack of trained mental health professionals. There are only 4.5 psychiatrists per 100,000 young people. Even those with serious mental health problems are being turned away because Britain has one of the lowest numbers of hospital beds in Europe for young people struggling with such problems.

The Prime Minister told us that if you are young, you will find it harder than ever before to own your own home. Wages have not kept pace with property costs. The IFS found that about 40% of young adults cannot afford to buy one of the cheapest homes in their area even with a 10% deposit. Meanwhile, 1.7 million private rented households are paying more than a third of their income in rent, making it harder than ever to save. To make matters worse, an estimated 150,000 homes for social rent have been lost between 2013 and 2018 because of the Government’s failure to address a broken housing system.

These are all things that the right hon. Member for Maidenhead (Mrs May) told us that she would address, in her first statement as Prime Minister, yet almost three years later, it is clear to me that she has failed to achieve her mission. Instead she has supported the powerful, prioritised the wealthy and entrenched the advantages of the fortunate few. I hope that the next Prime Minister will do more than just talk about injustices and actually match policy to rhetoric.

6.10 pm

Jo Platt (Leigh) (Lab/Co-op): It is an honour to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Edgbaston (Preet Kaur Gill). To give everyone the opportunity to succeed, we need to tackle the injustices that hold people back. Poverty and inequality hold far too many people back in my constituency and are the No. 1 issue that they face. Our current system exposes the systematic imbalances and inequalities across society and the country. It dictates the life chances of people, often based purely on their postcode or their parents’ experiences, and it entrenches a sense that, regardless of someone’s aspiration and through no fault of their own, their talents can be limited. Ultimately, if someone’s destiny in life is predetermined, if their ambition and hard work do not pay off and if the town that they call home is not providing them with the first rung on the ladder to success, surely they will conclude that this is not a country, society or economy working for them. Far too many people in Leigh are now being brought up believing exactly that.

I am hugely privileged to represent such a proud town and constituency. The resilience that the people demonstrate astounds me, but there is only so much that people can take. What is so heartbreaking is that, Thatcher was once the heart of the industrial revolution and the soul of the country. The mills provided not only employment, but community. Our economy and industry were at the foundation of our society and represented the glue that held the fabric of our society together. The success of our towns was everyone’s success. The closure of our mills, factories, pits and rail connectivity was therefore felt not just economically but socially. As the promise of a community that worked for everybody died, the glue that once held our community closely together began to dissolve.

Thatcher’s Britain sowed the seeds of social fragmentation, but it was not until the austerity of the Tory-Lib Dem Government that the fertile ground was provided for the issues that we face today. Austerity pitted community against community and town against town, all scrambling for a drip of investment while the Government mercilessly cut the funding and investment gap. Although Leigh is not unique in facing these challenges, last year the statistics confirmed what many of us locally already knew: as a constituency, we are at a particular disadvantage. Thanks to the Library, we know that Leigh ranks in the lowest 7% of English constituencies for social mobility. We in Leigh also know that this is not because of any lack of ambition, determination or effort, but because our proud town has been given a sore deal. We have been let down.

We are without not only the core industrial or economic base, but the means to rebuild our economy, reskill our workforce or renew our community. Because of underinvestment by the Government, their austerity agenda and their inability to invest in place-based schemes that provide communities with the resources to build within their areas, the people of Leigh are left believing that their proud hometown will no longer provide the opportunities that they deserve.

As we have seen, however, tackling social mobility alone is no longer going to cut it. We know that children’s life chances are determined at birth. Children from low-income families are more likely to fall behind in education, have poorer health and leave school with few or no qualifications. Without tackling the issue of poverty, we will never be able to provide opportunity for all. Social justice provides not only the means, but the opportunity. This is not about a select number of children being given a chance, but about access and justice for all. Social justice and social mobility must go hand in hand.

In this time of incredible division for our country, only a radical plan to reshape our country will heal those divisions and bring people back together. We must build Britain inclusively—sharing prosperity and opportunity across the country, and utilising the incredible assets of our post-industrial northern towns as the
natural home for the economics of the future to flourish in. We know there are no quick, simple answers and that is why the Opposition have the detailed, costed plans to tackle our social mobility crisis by rebuilding Britain and restoring faith in a society that should be working for every town across the country.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. I am afraid that I have to reduce the time limit to five minutes, with apologies to Marsha De Cordova.

6.15 pm

Marsha De Cordova (Battersea) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Leigh (Jo Platt).

This Government have talked up social mobility, but their record is woeful. Last month, the UN special rapporteur on extreme poverty compared Tory austerity policies to the creation of 19th-century workhouses. He described cuts as leading to the “systematic immiseration of a significant part of the British population”, with “punitive, mean-spirited, and often callous” austerity policies causing what he called a “social calamity and an economic disaster.”

This is truly a damning indictment, and it joins many international bodies in slamming the Government for their treatment of society’s most oppressed and marginalised. A recent Human Rights Watch report said that “cruel and harmful” Government policies are responsible for increasing the number of children going without adequate food.

We are used to hearing about such things happening in poor and exploited countries, but not in the fifth richest country on earth. However, this is the consequence of nine years of Tory austerity. It is what happens when we slash social security spending for some of our most vulnerable, public services are starved of much-needed funding and wages are frozen. Many Members from across the House, or perhaps just on the Opposition side of the House, come across many such instances in their constituency surgeries—from families crammed into unsuitable, overcrowded and poor housing to disabled people being denied social security. We see it in food banks handing out record numbers of food parcels—1.6 million last year, with more than 500,000 for children. That is shameful.

At the same time, the assault on the living standards of the poorest, the Government have handed out over £110 billion in tax cuts to some of the wealthiest. The 1,000 richest individuals in this country now hold record wealth: £771 billion in total, up nearly £50 billion in the last year alone. This is a shameful record, and it is the Government’s legacy—record numbers of billionaires in this country. The richest 1,000 people in the UK have wealth estimated at £724 billion, which is more than the wealth of the poorest 40%, at £567 billion. That privileged 1,000 saw their income increase by £66 billion in one year alone and by £255 billion over the last five years.

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): I am afraid that the Government’s record on inequalities, across the piece, is absolutely woeful. I was particularly concerned by some of the data mentioned by the Secretary of State.

Last month, on the 49th anniversary of the Equal Pay Act 1970, the Equality Trust published more data showing pay inequalities. It analysed the average pay of chief executives and other workers, gender pay gaps and gender bonus gaps in FTSE 100 companies. That followed the report, in February, of an increase in income inequality according to the Gini coefficient, a standard measure. Who could forget “Fat Cat Friday” in January, which exposed the fact that top executives were earning 133 times more than their average worker? In 1998, the ratio was 47.

My hon. Friend the Member for Wirral West (Margaret Greenwood) was absolutely right to draw attention to the impact of austerity and the Government’s choices—and they are choices: poverty and inequality are politically determined—to ensure that their tax and spending plans harm the poorest most. That is not just my view. A report from the Equality and Human Rights Commission has shown that the poorest 10th of households will lose, on average, 10% of their income by 2022, which is equivalent to £1 in every £8. There have been similar findings from the Institute for Fiscal Studies and other organisations.

However, it is not just a question of income inequalities. Wealth inequalities are also prevalent and have worsened in this country. The richest 1,000 people in the UK have wealth estimated at £724 billion, which is more than the wealth of the poorest 40%, at £567 billion. That privileged 1,000 saw their income increase by £66 billion in one year alone and by £255 billion over the last five years.

Matt Rodda (Reading East) (Lab): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Debbie Abrahams: Very briefly.

Matt Rodda: Does my hon. Friend agree that, at a time of widening inequality and huge gaps between those who have advantages in life and those who do not, it is deeply and utterly irresponsible for a leading politician to promise tax cuts to the very wealthy while lacking any consideration for those in much more challenging circumstances?
Debbie Abrahams: I could not agree more. In fact, I think that a stock question to all who aspire to be the leader of this country should be “How are you going to tackle the inequalities that our country faces?”

The impact of these inequalities on life expectancy, which is now stalling after decades of growth, has not gone unnoticed. Among women, the gap is the largest since the 1920s, and for older women—as we have heard from other Members today—life expectancy is actually reversing. What has been the Government’s response? To increase the state pension age. People’s lives are becoming shorter, but they will have to work for longer to receive their pensions. The gap in life expectancy between the rich and the poor is 10 years for men and seven a half years for women, and that applies to healthy life expectancy as well.

The analysis shows that, while life expectancy is slowing down in the United States and some European countries, the slowdown is worst in the United Kingdom. This is not a developed country phenomenon: life expectancy is increasing in Denmark, Norway and other Scandinavian countries. The stalling in life expectancy has been picked up by the actuaries, who have estimated that there could be a 15% reduction in pension deficits—equivalent to £310 billion.

None of this is new. Seminal works such as “The Spirit Level”, published 10 years ago, showed that in societies and communities in which the gaps between the rich and poor are narrow, life expectancy, educational attainment, social mobility, trust and more increase. In addition, more equal societies see economic benefits, as described by the International Monetary Fund in 2015. Fairer, more equal societies benefit everyone.

Wilkinson and Pickett’s most recent work, “The Inner Level”, examined how more equal societies reduce stress and improve everyone’s wellbeing, unpicking the evidence of the pathophysiological pathways and mechanisms through which inequalities act to affect our health and wellbeing, physical, mental, emotional and more. Our health and longevity depend on how and where we are able to live, which in turn depends on our financial means. But on top of this, there is an independent and universal effect that reflects positions in our hierarchy: our class, status and relative power. The impacts of inequalities in power—political, practical and personal—are worthy of greater exploration and analysis, and I hope that the Deaton review will pick up on that.

6.25 pm

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to follow so many other considered and thoughtful contributions on the complex issue of inequalities and structural poverty in this country.

While the impacts of the Tory party’s austerity agenda over the last decade are well documented and have been well discussed, there is a broader issue to be considered, particularly when looking at a city such as Glasgow: the economic geography of the city. Madam Deputy Speaker, you are no stranger to the city of Glasgow. I was brought up in a part of the city called Milton. I was speaking about Milton just yesterday to David Begg, who was involved recently in undertaking a study into connectivity around Glasgow and how the transport system could better join up the city and make improvements on equality. We were talking about Milton and how cut off it is from the city. That got me on to thinking about the story of how I uttered my first word.

My first word was, oddly, someone’s name, “Brian”. I was always curious about why my first word might be Brian, and it was the name on the fruit and veg van that used to go around the housing scheme of Milton. There was no grocery shop in Milton at that time as the housing scheme was built in the post-war period as a way to relieve slum housing conditions in the city and overcrowding, but many of the amenities were never built properly and the legacy of that persisted. That speaks in many ways to the broader issues of structural poverty and inequality in Glasgow.

Research based on the historical development of Glasgow, particularly in the post-war period, suggests that Glaswegians’ higher risk of premature death was caused by that structural inequality created through the planning system. Some researchers have labelled this the “Glasgow effect”: excess mortality that cannot be accounted for by poverty and deprivation alone. It impacts on everyone in the city.

Glaswegians have a 30% higher risk of dying before they are 65—which is considered a premature death—than people in comparable deindustrialised cities such as Liverpool and Manchester. They die from the big killers—cancer, heart disease and strokes—as well as the despair diseases of drugs, alcohol and suicide. Although they have a higher chance of dying prematurely in Glasgow, if they are poor, deaths across all ages and social classes are 15% greater. So it is clear that economic advancement alone and mobility will not improve overall life expectancy.

The mystery of the Glasgow effect has been studied for many years. Recent research by the Glasgow Centre for Population Health has shed new light on the situation. In explaining excess mortality, it confirmed that in many cases the combination of the historical effects of overcrowding, poor planning decisions in previous decades and a democratic deficit in local communities is among the reasons that drive premature deaths in Glasgow.

The issue of what was described by one researcher as “skimming the cream” of the city’s population to choose its best citizens in new towns is particularly striking. The research is based on Scottish Office documents. It discovered that towns such as Cumbernauld, East Kilbride and Irvine were populated by Glasgow’s skilled workforce and young families, while the city was left with “the old, the very poor and the almost unemployable,” which severely harmed the city’s tax base and distorted the population of the city region as a whole.

Clearly, this legacy needs to be addressed in the city of Glasgow through repopulation, re-densifying and increasing the diversity of incomes and social class into the city to address that structural effect and improve social mobility. This is a long-term strategy. It needs to be gripped at all levels of government to address these long-term structural problems.

The issues in my constituency are clear. Although efforts were made, with great intentions, to improve social housing in the cities, such as the construction of Red Road in Sighthill, the impact of Thatcherite policies in the 1980s led to slum conditions emerging in those areas, particularly when drug dealers moved in, problems with antisocial behaviour and despair were apparent.
and the housing quality was reduced. Efforts have been made to improve those situations, most notably in 2003 with the writing off of the City of Glasgow’s £1 billion social housing debt, which has allowed an unprecedented expansion and renovation of the city’s housing stock, but there is still a structural problem with that issue in Glasgow. In Springburn, 91% of the population still live within 500 metres of vacant and derelict land.

I welcome Labour’s social justice commission proposal because it will delve into the structural and complex factors that drive structural inequality and social mobility issues in cities such as Glasgow. There needs to be much more research into, for example, understanding the comparative differences between Glasgow and other deindustrialised cities in Britain to understand what can be done, particularly when looking at the role of the physical environment as a component of deprivation. That is a major issue, and that is something the Government and the Opposition should consider as they consider solving this problem.

6.30 pm

Siobhain McDonagh (Mitcham and Morden) (Lab): It is a delight to follow the really thoughtful speech of my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow North East (Mr Sweeney).

I do not believe that there is a parent who does not want the best for their child, and I do not believe that there is a teacher or a school that does not want the best for their pupils. I do not even believe that there is a politician or party that does not want every child to get as far as their hard work takes them. Why, then, in the 21st century and the fifth largest economy in the world are the life chances of our children still determined by the economic status of their parents? The statistical reality is that social mobility has remained virtually stagnant since 2014, and for children born into a family at the bottom of the income distribution, it will take five generations for them to move up to the average income.

These are the roots of social mobility, and they start from birth, leaving an attainment gap that will be lifelong. If we track the route of a disadvantaged child, we see that by age three, they are already four and a half months behind their better-off peers. By age eleven, they are 10 months behind, with less than half of poor children deemed secondary school-ready. By GCSE, they are 18 months behind. If they were not secondary school-ready, they had just a 10% chance of getting five good GCSEs, and by A-level, just 16% of those on free school meals attain at least two A-levels, compared with 39% of all other pupils. The anomaly is the Harris Federation, which is the only large school chain where children on free school meals outperform every other group of children in every other school.

Given those figures, the importance of the early years for a disadvantaged child could not be clearer. Why then do the early years workforce face a skills gap, low pay and poor career progression? Why are a staggering 45% of childcare workers surviving on in-work benefits, and why has the Department for Education not committed to funding the national schools breakfast programme by March next year, despite the clear evidence that children achieve an average of two months’ additional academic progress in reading and maths over the course of one year alone when breakfast is provided?

Given the scale of this issue, I am afraid I disagree with those on my Front Bench on abolishing key stage 1 and 2 SATs. How can we ever close the gap if we do not know how many children are behind? This commission is one way of measuring progress and of ensuring standards. I understand the argument that SATs can be stressful, but when a teacher at St Mark’s Primary School in my constituency asked her year 6 class to write down what was stressful in their lives, they wrote about their housing and living conditions, their fear of knife crime and their fear that their scarf-covered mother would be attacked in the street. It is the real-life problems that are going unaddressed by this Conservative Government that worry them, not the tests that they are sitting.

The evidence for the Government is clear. We know that poorer children do better in good schools, but we also know that they are 19 times more likely to go to a bad school. So why would the Government try to encourage all schools to become academies? Labour’s successful academy programme just changed failing schools. Now a staggering 53,000 pupils are attending zombie academies—academies that failed their tests. I recently received a letter from Jonathan Duff, acting director in the office of the regional schools commissioner for the south-east of England, who said that a transfer to another trust is not mandatory when an academy is judged inadequate. Could it be that many failed academies are in such debt that no new sponsor will take them on without a bail-out from the Department for Education? These poor children are the innocent victims of this Government’s policy. When summing up, or in writing, will the Minister say how many failed academies are in debt and how many schools and, more importantly, poor children are being left in limbo simply because the Government are not willing to pay the bill?

6.35 pm

Mohammad Yasin (Bedford) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh). So bad is this Government’s failure on social mobility that in December 2017 the Social Mobility Commission walked out in protest, warning that “nothing” was being done to deal with inequalities and social division. That happened within a year of the new Prime Minister delivering a mission statement to the nation, promising to make Britain a country that works not for the privileged few, but for every one of us, and to tackle “the burning injustice that, if you’re born poor, you will die on average 9 years earlier than others.”

Of all the Government’s failures—on Brexit, schools, public services, and children’s and adult social care—this is the most shameful, because not only have they utterly failed to improve the lives of the less fortunate but they have made those lives much more difficult.

Homelessness, food bank usage and in-work poverty have soared, and the Government’s own data shows that the number of children in absolute poverty has risen to nearly 4 million. What could be more telling of a policy failure than the fact that a quarter of children are growing up in poverty? The privileged have become wealthier, while people from disadvantaged backgrounds have had their opportunities to get on and move up cut off. That is the Conservative way. Big businesses and the super-rich get tax cuts, while children grow up in poverty and schools struggle to pay for basic resources, struggling even to stay open for a full working week.
A hungry child cannot learn, which is why poorer children are falling behind their peers by the age of five. Teenagers who cannot afford university tuition fees and increased debt have their life chances cut off at 18, with children from better-off backgrounds almost twice as likely to go to university than those from low-income families. The out-of-control housing market prevents children from leading independent lives or from moving to bigger cities where job prospects are better. “Know your place and stay in it”—that is the result of Tory austerity.

It is a shameful record, and it is set to get worse under this shambolic Government. The front runner to be the next Prime Minister has already found £10 billion to fund a tax cut benefitting only the richest 12% of taxpayers. The Foreign Secretary wants to cut corporation tax even further than the Government already have to 12.5%, making the UK’s tax rate by far the lowest in the G20 and turning the country into a tax haven for rich people. Whoever is appointed to become our next Prime Minister, there will be more of the same for the majority—“Know your place and pay for the mistakes of the Minister, there will be more of the same for the majority—people. Whoever is appointed to become our next Prime Minister, there will be more of the same for the majority—

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The costs of living and working in London are well documented, but it is only when we look more closely at the figures that we realise just how much an unpaid internship freezes out those from less well-off communities. For example, recent data shows that the cost of an unpaid internship in London has gone up to more than £1,000 a month. In reality, very few of my young constituents in Glasgow’s east end would be able to afford to come to live in London and work in Parliament as an unpaid intern.

We are therefore left with a pool of largely middle class, often privately educated individuals who can essentially afford to work for free, and I understand that, for them, this is a phenomenal experience. But the inescapable truth is that, however convenient it is for MPs to have beefed up staffing teams in Westminster, we should be doing more to ensure that people are adequately paid for the work they do. If we do not, we will continue to have a Parliament in which the majority of interns are from well-off backgrounds.

We know these internships often provide a route into paid employment. Research from the Social Mobility Commission finds that around 40% of graduates working in a profession had previously worked as an intern to get on the first rung of the ladder.

Then there is the wider issue of how internships are advertised, and whether they are transparent or, in fact, just part of an old boy network. Let us say that a person is in the unusual position of having the spending power or capital to be able to work for free. The next thing they have to do is go on the spurious Work4MP website, of which I suspect few folk in Easterhouse shopping centre will have heard, to search for these wonderful unpaid internships.

Out of courtesy, I will not name the hon. Member, but a quick search on the Work4MP website this morning found an advert for not one but two interns to come and work, free of charge, for that Member of Parliament during the summer recess. It is for the conscience of that hon. Member to decide whether that is fair or advances social mobility, but we need to do more as MPs to ensure that the interns we take on are representative of our communities and help to diversify Parliament.

It is all good and well for us to debate how we tackle inequality and promote social mobility, but I am reminded of a verse in the book of Matthew:

“Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother’s eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye?”

Put simply, if we are serious about showing leadership on social mobility and inequalities, perhaps we ought to put our own House in order first.

I realise that it is not just in politics that the practice of using unpaid interns is rife. In journalism, for example, 83% of new entrants do internships for, on average, seven weeks. Some 92% of those internships are unpaid, which will almost certainly be a factor in squeezing out people from less-advantaged backgrounds. If this place is to be truly representative of the society we seek to serve, we need to do more to diversify the SWGs of young people coming into Parliament to intern for MPs.

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Put simply, if we are serious about showing leadership on social mobility and inequalities, perhaps we ought to put our own House in order first.
When the board of the Social Mobility Commission took the unprecedented step of resigning wholesale 18 months ago, it was not a decision taken hastily or lightly; it was an act of desperation, following months of frustration at the Government’s failure to engage meaningfully on the issue. We have a new chair now, Dame Martina Milburn, who attended the all-party group last month, when we asked for her view on what she considered to be the top three asks of the Government. She said that they were: extending the eligibility of the 30 hours’ free childcare to those working eight hours a week; introducing a student premium for those aged 16 to 19; and making the Government a living wage employer.

A recent study by Pearson found that there had been a 60% drop in funding for 16 to 19-year-olds in the past few years—how on earth is that investing in young people? As for the Government being a living wage employer, as a result of what she said I have been asking written questions to Departments and it seems that most do not even hold the data on who receives it already, which hardly suggests great enthusiasm for the idea.

I was encouraged by similarities between some of the recommendations the all-party group made in its recent report on the regional attainment gap and those put forward by the commission, such as looking at the way Ofsted operates; thinking differently about how the pupil premium can be used; and the importance of children’s centres in getting a good early start in life.

The question we both have is: are the Government listening? What happens if the commission’s recommendations are not acted on? How much longer will things be left to stagnate? For how much longer will the most likely experience in the job market for our young people be casual work, low pay and chronic insecurity?

The commission’s report provides us with a wholesale national analysis of the issues, which demands cross-government action. Yes, its focus is on education—addressing inequalities in access to early years provision; primary and secondary schools; and technical, further and higher education—but it goes far wider and includes access to work, tax, welfare, housing, transport and health, to name but a few. There is plenty to build on, but we need a focused, consistent approach across many Departments, one that transcends the day-to-day whirl of politics. That is where I hope the commission can really add value.

Taking just two of the headlines from the latest state of the nation report, we can see the scale of the challenge we face. The first is that social mobility in this country is virtually stagnant and has barely moved in the past five years. The second is that a staggering half a million more children are in poverty now than there were seven years ago. Those two facts alone tell us we need to do so much more, and it is even more damning that this is coming off the years of consecutive economic growth. Could there be a clearer example of how growth is not evenly spread?

I believe there is much merit in the Select Committee’s recommendation that a Minister be given specific responsibility for leading cross-government work on social mobility—with a dedicated unit to tackle social injustice. Indeed, I am pleased that my own party has pledged to create a Minister for social justice, who would also work cross-departmentally to help drive the social justice agenda across all parts of the Government, so that whom someone was born to and where they were born are no longer the biggest influences on their prospects. The analysis that the commission’s powers need to be expanded and become much more proactive is one I support; the limited role it has at the moment is evident from the previous chair’s frustrations and resignation. There does need to be much greater accountability and transparency about what the Government do in this area. It seems incredible that no automatic impact assessment is carried out on every piece of legislation. Perhaps if it were, we would not have much legislation coming forward.

I wholeheartedly agree that social justice should be central for any Labour Government, but I also believe that social mobility can play a part in levelling the playing field as we work towards creating a society where everyone has the same opportunities in life, regardless of their background. We have a long way to go, and as long as three quarters of the senior judges, more than half the top 100 news journalists and more than two thirds of British Oscar winners are privately educated, we will not have a fairer society and the kids from the council estates will still get the message that those jobs are not for them. So “aspiration” should not be a dirty word, but “inequality” and “injustice” should be. The evidence shows that countries that have greater social mobility tend to have less inequality, thus demonstrating the two go together. It is a scandal that in 2019 where someone is born and whom they are born to are still the biggest influences on their prospects. If we are ever going to move forward as a nation, everyone should be given the same opportunity to achieve their potential.

Lyn Brown (West Ham) (Lab): We have heard some really impressive speeches in this debate, including those from my hon. Friends the Members for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle (Emma Hardy), for Bradford South (Judith Cummins), for Birmingham, Edgbaston (Preet Kaur Gill), for Leigh (Jo Platt), for Battersea (Marsha De Cordova), for Oldham West and Royton (Jim McMahon), for Glasgow North East (Mr Sweeney), for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh), for Bedford (Mohammad Yasin) and for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders). They were cracking speeches all, and I am so proud to be included in their number this afternoon.

In April, the Social Mobility Commission told us that social mobility had stagnated, and it is going to get worse without change. This was yet another wake-up call to a catatonic Government so consumed by the disaster of their Brexit that they cannot seem to do, frankly, anything.

Poverty and inequality in this country are dire. In the G7, only Trump’s America is more unequal. Last month, Human Rights Watch told the story of Allie from Hull, who was transferred on to universal credit when she 18, as she became pregnant. She had exceptionally severe morning sickness almost every day for months. She would call the jobcentre and throw up while on the phone, but she was still fined £60 a week from the money that she needed to live, for two whole months. After sanctions and bills, she had £10 left. She was stuck in the flat on her own, lonely, ashamed to go out and suffering from depression. At her time of need, our
Government, by their actions, got her into debt with her rent, council tax and water. They left her with so little money that she would wake up hungry with nothing to eat in the House.

For Allie, there was no safety net: it had been cut away. Just think about it, because actually it is worse than that. She was 18 years old. Many of us would not consider that to be a fully grown adult in our own families. We would not want our 18-year-old child to be living on £10 left over each week, especially when they were pregnant. That £10 will not buy Allie or her baby the nutrition that they need. What will happen if Allie’s troubles do not end here—if, like 900,000 others, the only job that Allie can access while her baby is growing is one with zero hours? What if, like so many jobs, it has no security, no workplace training, no progression and simply not enough hours to keep her away from the food bank and out of debt? What impact will that have on the life chances of Allie and her child?

Some 4.5 million children are already in poverty, and 70% of them are in families where at least one parent is in work. The fact is that in-work poverty is rising faster than employment. When the Government are faced with damning research or analysis, whether from the UN, Human Rights Watch, think-tanks that are respected across the House or child poverty charities, they do not even bother to respond. We have had the Chancellor through all this, the Conservative party has had the gall to talk about opportunities. The Government cannot say that opportunities are increasing for children in my gall to talk about opportunities. The Government cannot say that opportunities are increasing when Human Rights Watch, think-tanks that are respected across the House or child poverty charities, they do not even bother to respond. We have had the Chancellor saying that there are 14 million children in poverty in this country, but that is what the Joseph Rowntree Foundation says, it is what the Social Metrics Commission said and it is what the Government’s own statistics say. When it comes to poverty and inequality, frankly this Government are a bit like Millwall: “No one likes us, we said and it is what the Government’ s own statistics say .

This country, but that is what the Joseph Rowntree Foundation says, it is what the Social Metrics Commission said and it is what the Government’s own statistics say. When it comes to poverty and inequality, frankly this Government are a bit like Millwall: “No one likes us, we don’t care!” When we talk about our children’s life chances, they should care.

Through all this, the Conservative party has had the gall to talk about opportunities. The Government cannot say that opportunities are increasing for children in my constituency: 50% of them live in poverty. They cannot say that opportunities are increasing when 120,000 children were homeless last Christmas. They cannot say that opportunities are increasing when Human Rights Watch states that their policies are “cruel and harmful”, or when they have been told that they are depriving children in this country of their simple right to food. As the UN rapporteur said last month, it is about the glue that holds our society together being “deliberately removed and replaced with a harsh and uncaring ethos”.

It is simply shocking.

Hard work is essential—obviously—but there is no shortage of hard work in this country. On average, Britons work more hours a year than they did a decade ago, and for a lower real wage. Talent is essential, but there is no shortage of that either. We all see it every time we visit a school. The truth is that we are able to create better lives when Governments invest. We need a Government who will focus on this agenda now, target the real divisions in our society and offer a joined-up strategy to tackle them. This Government cannot offer that vision, but Labour will.

We understand the simple truths. We do not want a grammar school society in which we get a better chance only if others get a worse one. That is not socially just. We do not want a society as horribly unequal as ours, where the richest 1,000 individuals have more wealth than the entire bottom 40% of the country. Since the 1970s, our country has become massively and increasingly unfair. The benefit of the little sustainable growth that there has been has gone to a narrow elite: the share of national income going to the top 1% has almost tripled since 1980.

Our economy does not work for the many. Huge efforts are needed to change that, but I really do not think that the Conservative party gets it. It will never ensure that the elite pay their fair share—it ain’t gonna bite the hand that feeds it—but Labour will make that commitment; it is who we are. That is why we will change the Social Mobility Commission, so that it investigates the fairness of our society across every policy area, from class inequality to regional inequality, and creates fair opportunities for all. We will match that by creating co-ordination on social justice across a Labour Government.

Cutting poverty and increasing life chances will be core goals. We will assess every policy to make sure that it plays a part in cutting child poverty and creating a fairer country. We will look at pay gaps and at the responsibility on every part of government, from parish councils to Whitehall offices, to increase social justice. We will look at new ways of tackling class discrimination and all other forms of inequality—and we will not mark our own homework; our policies and statistics will be trustworthy because they will be checked from the outside.

A Labour Government will rebuild public trust in politics and rebuild the public services that give our children a fair starting point in life: social homes, public buses and trains, regional and national public banks to fuel hundreds of billions of pounds of investment, a national education service providing the skills that our economy needs, and a flourishing NHS. A Labour Government will work tirelessly to end child poverty. A Labour Government will be a Government for the many, not the few.

6.57 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Nadhim Zahawi): I welcome the opportunity to respond on behalf of the Government. I was sorry to hear the hon. Member for West Ham (Lyn Brown) accuse the Government of not responding to the report of the UN rapporteur. That is not true; we have responded. I was also sorry to hear her exploit Allie, an 18-year-old, in an attempt to weaponise this issue, when we have heard really thoughtful contributions from other colleagues. Labour employs the politics of division; it was sad to see that today.

I thank colleagues who have spoken, including the hon. Member for Airdrie and Shotts (Neil Gray), my right hon. Friend the Member for Putney (Justine Greening), the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle (Emma Hardy), my hon. Friend the Member for Chichester (Gillian Keegan), the hon. Member for Bradford South (Judith Cummins), my hon. Friend the Member for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford), and the hon. Members for Birmingham, Edgbaston (Preet Kaur Gill), for Leigh (Jo Platt), for Battersea (Marsha De Cordova), for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams), for Glasgow North East (Mr Sweeney), for Mitcham...
and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh), for Bedford (Mohammad Yasin), for Glasgow East (David Linden), and for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders).

Many of the contributions this afternoon were about the long-term issue of delivering social mobility. As Under-Secretary of State with responsibility for children and families, I will naturally focus in my speech primarily on the work of my Department. You will not be surprised to hear, Madam Deputy Speaker, that I believe that one of the most effective means of reducing inequality is education. As someone who came to these shores unable to speak a word of English, I know at first hand how education can change lives and truly open doors. Everyone has the right to a good education, regardless of their circumstances.

Social mobility, tackling inequality and social justice are rightly critical priorities for my Department and of course my Government as a whole. That is why, for the Social Mobility Commission, we have recruited a fantastic chair in Dame Martina Milburn, along with a board of commissioners each with a unique experience of social mobility. I will say a few words about their vital work.

At the end of April, the commission published a comprehensive “State of the Nation” report which shines a light on where the Government, businesses and employers can continue to raise the bar for everyone living in this country.

Neil Gray: Will the Minister give way?

Nadhim Zahawi: If I have time at the end, I will happily take an intervention.

We welcome the commission’s thorough analysis and its efforts to promote social mobility and social justice across the United Kingdom, and we have therefore awarded it £2 million to undertake further work on that agenda. Indeed, despite some claims to the contrary, social justice is already an intrinsic part of the commission’s role. It is already concerned to help the most disadvantaged in society and to ensure that someone’s background does not determine future chances in life.

This Government share the view that everyone should have the chance to fulfil their potential. That is why we are taking action across the whole Government in order to make real progress.

Emma Hardy: Will the Minister give way?

Nadhim Zahawi: I will at the end if I have time. I have a lot to get through, I will try to respond to the hon. Lady and to other contributors to the debate, and I will happily take interventions at the end if possible.

Making progress means building a strong economy, achieving record levels of employment and reforming the welfare system so that it supports people into work. Now, 665,000 fewer children grow up in workless households, the support of an income making them less likely to grow up in poverty. The UK’s national living wage is growing faster than similar or higher minimum wages in other OECD countries, such as Belgium, France or Germany.

David Linden: Will the Minister give way?

Nadhim Zahawi: I will try to take some interventions at the end. I want to get through my remarks and to address some of the questions asked of me.

In 2014, we extended benefits-related free meals to cover further education—not something that the Labour party had contemplated—and introduced universal infant free school meals, benefitting a further 1.5 million infant pupils. In 2018, we introduced new eligibility under universal credit, and we estimate that by 2022 more children will benefit from free school meals than under the previous benefits system. Such efforts are targeted at the root causes of poverty and disadvantage.

Improving this country’s education system starts in the early years—Martina Milburn focused on that in her report. We have already made progress in closing the gap that emerges between disadvantaged children and their peers: 71.5% of children achieved a “good level of development” in 2018, up from 51.7% in 2013. Despite that very encouraging progress, far too many children still start school behind their peers, in particular in language development, which a number of colleagues mentioned. We have set out an important ambition to halve, by 2028, the proportion of children finishing their reception year without the communication and reading skills that they need.

To tackle that, this year alone the Government will spend about £3.5 billion—yes, Mr Deputy Speaker, you heard me right—on early education entitlements, which is more than any previous Government have spent. Our early years social mobility programme, backed by more than £100 million of investment, includes a professional development programme for early years practitioners, who will shape those little ones to make the most of their lives as they become adults; and work with Public Health England to train 1,000 health visitors to identify speech, language and communication in families who need that additional help. We will soon launch a home learning environment campaign, because what happens in the home in the earliest years has a huge impact, and there are many opportunities to help parents to support their children to learn—to have the confidence to help their children to learn better and faster. I look forward to working with hon. Members across this House to ensure that we make the most of the very significant potential of that campaign to help disadvantaged children.

This Government have focused on raising school standards because we know that what happens in our classrooms is critical to reducing inequality. There is nothing moral or decent about crashing an economy and leaving the most vulnerable people behind. That is why we are targeting extra support at the areas of greatest challenge and least opportunity, to raise standards and attract great teachers to our primary and secondary schools. This has helped to ensure that, as of December last year, there are 1.9 million more children in good schools than in 2010, representing 85% of children, compared with just 66% in 2010. That is partly down to our reforms.

I am pleased to say that this Government have also made significant progress in closing the opportunity gap with regard to education. The difference in attainment between disadvantaged pupils and their peers has fallen across all stages of education. Commenting on the changes we have made to the system, including the pupil premium, the Institute for Fiscal Studies, which has been mentioned a number of times today, said:

“A system that was substantially skewed...towards the better off is now, if anything, skewed towards the least well off.”

It also said:

"Reforms since 2010 are likely to have increased total funding in favour of pupils from poorer backgrounds."

Our efforts do not stop there, when school comes to an end. To tackle inequality, everyone must have the right level of ongoing support to help them on a path to a skilled job, whether via university or a more practical, technical path. That is why widening access in higher education to ensure that an academic route is open to all is a priority for this Government, as shown in the recent report by Philip Augar.

Neil Gray: Will the Minister give way?

Nadhim Zahawi: I have said that I will at the end when I have a bit of time.

In 2018, 18-year-olds from disadvantaged backgrounds were proportionally 52% more likely to go to university than they were in 2009. Higher education providers have committed to spend £860 million in 2019-20 on measures to improve access—up significantly from £404 million; in fact, this is more than a doubling since 2009. This Government have also embarked on a long-overdue overhaul of technical education, backed by significant investment. Over 1.7 million people have started an apprenticeship since May 2015. Alongside this, we are introducing T-levels, which will offer a rigorous technical alternative to academic education, available to all.

On children’s social care, this Government take the view that all children, no matter where they live, should have access to the support they need to keep them safe, provide them with a stable and nurturing home, and overcome their challenges to achieve their potential. This Government are committed to improving outcomes for children in need of help and protection. That is why, owing to the work of my Department, my officials and all our teams, and of course all the brilliant social workers on the frontline, our children’s social care reform programme is working to deliver a highly capable, highly skilled social work workforce, with high-performing services everywhere and a national system of excellent and innovative practice.

It is both an economic and moral imperative that we ensure that the skills system works for all—my right hon. Friend the Member for Putney spoke eloquently about why the system really matters—and that it does so up and down the country. That is why we are taking action in every region, at every stage of a young person’s life, to close the opportunity gap. We are targeting extra support at some of the poorest areas of the country through our £72 million opportunity area programme and £24 million for Opportunity North East.

Members made a number of points that I would like to address. The hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden and the hon. Member for Bradford South attacked the Government about what steps they would be taking to support children who live in food insecurity. I remind them that we are supporting more than 1 million children with free school meals and investing up to £26 million in school breakfast clubs, providing approximately 2.3 million children aged four to six with a portion of fresh fruit or vegetables each day.

Siobhain McDonagh: Will the Minister give way?

Judith Cummins: The hon. Members for Battersea, for Oldham East and Saddleworth and for Bedford talked about the national living wage and the inequality—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): Order. Let me say to those on the two Front Benches that if the Minister wishes to give way, that is his choice, but I do not need somebody next to him chuntering that the shadow Minister only gave way once. Let us continue.

Nadhim Zahawi: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. I was trying to address some of the issues raised.

The issue of inequality was raised by the hon. Members for Battersea, for Oldham East and Saddleworth and for Bedford. Our policies are highly redistributive. This year the lowest-income households will, on average, receive more than £4 in public spending for every pound they pay in tax—

Mr Nicholas Brown (Newcastle upon Tyne East) (Lab): claimed to move the closure (Standing Order No. 36).

Question put forthwith. That the Question be now put.

Question agreed to.
Main Question accordingly put and agreed to.
Resolved.

That this House notes the findings of the Institute for Fiscal Studies that the UK is second only to the US in terms of income inequality among the major world economies in Europe and North America, that the share of income going to the wealthiest one per cent of households has nearly tripled in the last four decades and that deaths from suicide and from drug and alcohol overdoses are rising among middle-aged people; further notes that 1.6 million food parcels were handed out by Trussell Trust food banks last year and that child poverty has increased by 500,000 since 2010; recognises that following the resignation of the entire Social Mobility Commission in November 2017 in protest against the Government’s inaction and a near year-long delay in appointing replacements, the new Commission has found that social mobility has stagnated for four years; considers that the Government’s programme of austerity has decimated social security and led to growing inequality of provision across education, health, social care and housing; further considers that the Government’s austerity programme has caused and continues to cause suffering to millions of people; and calls on the Government to end child poverty, to end the need for the use of food banks and to take urgent action to tackle rising inequality throughout the UK and increase investment in public services.
Discrimination in Sport

7.12 pm

Dr Rosena Allin-Khan (Tooting) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House notes with concern that levels of discrimination across sport remain unacceptable; considers that a combination of tougher sanctions against offenders, action by social media companies and better education are key to driving discrimination out of sport; and calls on the Government to hold social media companies to account on this issue.

I would like to begin by congratulating England and Scotland’s women’s teams on a fantastic match on Sunday. It was great that the match was the UK’s most watched women’s game of all time, and I am sure the whole House will join me in wishing the English and Scottish teams the best of luck for the rest of the competition.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): Will the hon. Lady add to that the best of luck for the England women’s cricket team when they take on the West Indies in Sunday? That this House notes with concern that levels of discrimination across sport remain unacceptable; considers that a combination of tougher sanctions against offenders, action by social media companies and better education are key to driving discrimination out of sport; and calls on the Government to hold social media companies to account on this issue.

I would like to begin by congratulating England and Scotland’s women’s teams on a fantastic match on Sunday. It was great that the match was the UK’s most watched women’s game of all time, and I am sure the whole House will join me in wishing the English and Scottish teams the best of luck for the rest of the competition.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): Will the hon. Lady add to that the best of luck for the England women’s cricket team when they take on the West Indies in Chelmsford tomorrow?

Dr Allin-Khan: I wholeheartedly offer them my support. I was a keen cricketer as a young woman and am a huge fan of the game. Growing up—[Interruption.]

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): Order. I am not having a Member of Parliament intervening and then walking out. I suspect that the hon. Member for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford) wants to take her seat for a while longer.

Dr Allin-Khan: I expect that the hon. Lady is as keen on my speech as she is on cricket.

Growing up, I was one of the sportiest people in my school. I would give everything a shot, whether on the football pitch, the cricket field, a dojo or the athletics track. Why? Because I enjoyed it—the togetherness, the opportunity to create new friends and the bringing together of communities, teaching young people the positives of good physical health. I even did a BTEC in sport and physical recreation.

The shadow Secretary of State, my hon. Friend the Member for West Bromwich East (Tom Watson), can attest to the incredible benefit sport can bring to people’s mental and physical health. By his own admission, 18 months ago he would have struggled to climb up a step-ladder, yet last month he summited Snowdon.

There is a direct link between good physical health and strengthened mental health, but there is a worrying side of sport, which brings us here today and is plaguing the games we love—namely, discrimination. Discrimination, wherever it occurs, in whatever format, needs to be rooted out and eradicated. In football, if the abuse directed at players on pitches in this country and elsewhere is not stamped out, it will send a worrying message to the next generation of stars and spectators.

Great strides have been made in the fight against racism in recent decades, but we have seen a worrying trend this past season. Alarm bells are ringing. We were all shocked by the blatant racism experienced when England played Montenegro in March, where sustained racist chanting was aimed at England’s black players.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for her excellent speech. Does she agree that the Football Association and, indeed, the Premier League have a duty of care not to send British players to play on pitches in countries where they will be subject to significant racial abuse, that the sanctions enforced so far have not been sufficient and that we need to do much more to ensure that British football players can play the beautiful game without being subject to unacceptable abuse?

Dr Allin-Khan: I thank my hon. Friend for her very important intervention. I work very closely with the Premier League and the Football Association, and I know that they take racism and the treatment of fans and players extremely seriously. However, we all have a collective responsibility to ensure that this blight on our beautiful game is stamped out. My hon. Friend is right to raise that issue.

Callum Hudson-Odoi’s international debut for England should have been the proudest moment of his career to date, but he talked afterwards about hearing monkey chanting throughout the match. Raheem Sterling and Danny Rose also bravely spoke out, calling on world football’s governing bodies to do more. Montenegro was fined £20,000, which is a measly figure, given how much money we all know makes its way through the football ecosystem every single month.

I am sure that many in this House will agree that this problem is not just experienced by England when they play away from home. There is a deep problem on our own soil as well.

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making an excellent case for the need to tackle discrimination in sport. As well as racism, I am sure she is aware of homophobia, so will she join me in celebrating community football teams, such as the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender-inclusive Bristol Bisons and Bristol Panthers in my constituency, as well as anti-racist community football teams, such as the Easton Cowboys?

Dr Allin-Khan: It gives me great pleasure to congratulate the Bristol family mentioned by my hon. Friend. I will address homophobia later in my speech. She is absolutely right that it needs to be given the same priority as racism and gender discrimination, so I thank her for her intervention.

This past season, rarely a week has gone by without an incident being reported. Numerous teams walked off pitches in lower leagues. Danny Rose admitted that he cannot wait to see the back of football because of the abuse that he has been subjected to. Willfried Zaha highlighted just some of the truly awful tweets he receives, including one branding him a “diving monkey”. The #Enough campaign and subsequent social media boycott organised by the Professional Footballers Association saw players, pundits and organisations take a real stand against the abuse they receive. In a piece of tragic irony, however, some participating players even received racist abuse during the boycott itself. I know that the Premier League, the English Football League and the FA all feel very strongly about this issue.

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech. Many of us joined sportsmen and women across our country in the 24-hour social media boycott to express our solidarity and to show our disgust at the amount of racism online. Does my hon. Friend agree that the Government are
not doing enough to hold social media companies to account? They need not only to work with social media companies, but to show solidarity with organisations such as Show Racism the Red Card, which lead the way on this.

**Dr Allin-Khan:** It is almost as though my hon. Friend had read my speech. He is right about the sterling work of Show Racism the Red Card, which works tirelessly in schools to ensure that racism is rooted out from the heart, where it never deserves to see the light of day. Kick It Out has also worked for many years to eradicate that blight on our beautiful game.

Sadly, discrimination in sport, as in society, also extends to gender. Now retired from the pitch, former Arsenal and England player Alex Scott is a successful and respected TV pundit. Despite 140 caps for the England women’s team, multiple FA cups, several premier league titles and a Champions League trophy, Scott is still subject to intense sexist abuse. Alex Scott has said that she receives sexist insults online every single day.

Outside the pundits’ box, things are hardly better. In March, *The Daily Telegraph* surveyed more than 300 elite sportswomen from 20 sports and found that, shockingly, more than a third had been subjected to sexist comments from fans or social media, more than half had been the victim of gender discrimination and almost a third said that they had suffered sexual harassment.

When I called out an incident of sexism aimed at a female BBC reporter, in one day alone, I received 1,000 abusive tweets, including one from a former footballer and pundit who still presents on the radio today. He said, “Imagine being offended by it,” then called me an expletive. Other colourful tweets directed at me included: “Get a grip, woman”; “Get a life, silly girl”; “Tell her I’d give her a slap”—another expletive—and then a threat “Get a grip, woman”; “Get a life, silly girl”; “Tell her I’d give her a slap”—another expletive—and then a threat that I might get a slap; and “Shut your mouth and get back to the kitchen to make my tea”. I am rather good at making a cup of tea, particularly a builder’s brew, but I have no desire to get into any kitchen and make a cup of tea for someone directing social media abuse at me. Those tweets remain online today.

**Hannah Bardell** (Livingston) (SNP): The hon. Lady is making an excellent speech and I congratulate her wholeheartedly on bringing such an important issue to the Floor of the House. On social media abuse, does she share my shock that, when I was at the Women’s World cup at the weekend, supporting Scotland, I took a clip of a celebration by a female footballer on my iPad while watching one of the other matches, posted it online, and Fifa almost instantly got in touch with Twitter and had it removed? Does the hon. Lady agree that it is incredible that social media companies take copyright issues much more seriously than abuse?

**Dr Allin-Khan:** I thank the hon. Lady. Lady, whom I will call a friend and a teammate—I will explain shortly—for her intervention. How can it be that she was requested to remove her clip, yet millions of pieces of abuse directed at many Members of the House, let alone the wider public, remain online?

If elites of the sporting world are experiencing such prevalent sexism, one can only imagine how much worse the problem is at the grassroots. Fortunately, one area of the grassroots that I can vouch for is the women’s parliamentary football team. I would like to take the opportunity to give a great big shout-out to my football colleagues, who are some of the finest women I have ever played alongside. As our recent match against Crawley Old Girls showed, it does not matter what gender or age people are, or indeed what party they represent or which newspaper they may write for, sport is a unifying force.

Back pitch-side, Sol Campbell, with his hugely successful Arsenal and England career, also had impressive form in his first managerial role. When he took on the role of manager of Macclesfield Town in 2018, the Silkmen were rooted at the bottom of League Two and five points from safety. Under Campbell’s leadership, Macclesfield pulled off the great escape and stayed up with a last day draw against Cambridge United. All that was not enough to protect him from discrimination, however, with audible homophobic chanting recorded by several fans during a January game between Macclesfield and Cheltenham. The FA is investigating and I hope those responsible face appropriate and harsh consequences.

A titan of a different sport, our very own Gareth Thomas, played rugby for Wales 100 times and is the second-highest try scorer for his country. In December 2009, he courageously became the first openly gay professional rugby union player.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle):** Just for the record, he played rugby league as well.

**Dr Allin-Khan:** I am very happy to say that he also played rugby league. Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker, for your very important intervention and clarification.

Sadly, in November last year Thomas was viciously attacked just for being gay. Showing the immense strength of his character, however, Thomas chose to pursue restorative justice against his attacker. He made a full recovery, but the incident is a reminder of the barriers LGBT sportspeople continue to face, barriers that need not be there and must not be there.

**Hannah Bardell:** On homophobia in sport, does the hon. Lady agree that it is frankly ridiculous that we have countries such as Russia and Qatar holding international competitions like the World cup, when they persecute LGBT people and have seriously dubious human rights records? If we want to send a really strong message, we should not be allowing such countries to hold very important competitions.

**Dr Allin-Khan:** I thank the hon. Lady for her intervention, articulated perfectly as usual. She is absolutely right that no international competition should be held anywhere where fans, players, coaches and the wider public at large are persecuted for being of a minority group.

It will surprise no one in this Chamber that the discriminatory views I have outlined are plaguing social media platforms. This abuse is mostly left unpunished on social media. Racists, sexists and homophobes can leave awful comments, but without the use of specifically harmful phrases the algorithm does not notice how discriminatory those posts are. These comments would be indefensible in a court of law and indefensible in front of an employer, yet they go unpunished on social media. With social media, it is direct and it is personal. I know that many Members in the Chamber have
themselves experienced abuse on social media. We use Twitter daily and not just for our work. We scroll through when we wake up in the morning, while we travel to work or are on a tea break. When something hateful is directed at us, the pain and fear runs deep. It is personal; it is disgusting; and it is wrong.

For our sportsmen and sportswomen, who often carry millions more followers than the average MP, the abuse, and the pain that is felt, is magnified. Faceless accounts are run by bullies in bedrooms, sitting in their underpants, where an attacker can keep their anonymity and post vile replies to tweets. These people can be identified, but only through a police investigation. We want a system introduced where this information is sent through when we wake up in the morning, while we travel to work or are on a tea break. When something hateful is directed at us, the pain and fear runs deep. It is personal; it is disgusting; and it is wrong.

Chi Onwurah: I thank my hon. Friend for the fantastic points that she is making. I want to emphasise her last point: it is wrong to tar all fans with the acts of a few. British football—indeed, English football, which I am more familiar with—has come a long way since the ’60s and ’70s, when homophobic, racist and sexist abuse was more common in stadiums across the country.

Dr Allin-Khan: As an avid football fan who stands on the terrace alongside many other fans, I always feel very welcome. My hon. Friend is absolutely right to say that we have come a long way, but we have not come far enough. We need to stamp out any form of discrimination that makes any fan—even one—and any player—even one—feel unwelcome and as though there is not a place for them enjoying the sport that they love on any terrace in our country.

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): There is another form of discrimination relating to the second largest team sport played by black and minority ethnic people, marginalised communities and 11 to 15-year-olds: basketball. Basketball is hugely underfunded and under-supported. It is a sport played by the majority of black people in this country and it would take just £1 million a year to support it at elite level. Other sports played in posh public schools are hugely supported, so it is not a form of discrimination in sport that a sport played by our urban youth and black people is not supported but those played in the top public schools are?

Dr Allin-Khan: Basketball has no greater advocate than my hon. Friend, who makes very important points. I hope that we hear across the House about the importance of making sure that no child is discriminated against in their life in relation to achieving their full potential in whatever their endeavour is, whether that is academic or about exercising their sporting prowess. We need to make sure that every single child, every single young person and every single anybody who wants to have access to sports and fulfill their potential is able to do so.

We must recognise the work done by governing bodies, clubs and supporters’ groups across all sports to combat discrimination. Furthermore, I am clear that the only way to make progress on this is by involving fans’ groups and giving fans a seat at every table. Fans are the beating heart of sport and sport enjoyment. With the far right on our doorstep, let us be aware of their attempts to infiltrate football and other sports. Let us ensure that we are brave in speaking against them. When combating the far right, education is an extremely effective tool. Without the understanding of a deep-rooted issue, without realising the connotations behind a particular chant, innocent fans can get caught up in unsavoury actions. When there is a deliberate instance, however, of hate speech, whether on the terraces or on Twitter, the Ministry of Justice should be encouraging the Crown Prosecution Service to prioritise these cases and seek the harshest possible sentences.

We on the Opposition Benches, and I hope all of us in this House, want to live in a country where differences are welcomed—not just accepted, but wholeheartedly welcomed. I believe that there is no greater unifier than sport. Let us send a clear message from this House today that discrimination in sport will not be tolerated.

7.33 pm

The Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Jeremy Wright): Let me begin by thanking the hon. Member for Tooting (Dr Allin-Khan) for tabling the motion and for the way in which she opened the debate. As she says, the motion should unite us as sport does, and the Government will support it this evening. Sport should represent society at its best. As she says, it should bring us together. It should be a forum for fair competition, where anyone, regardless of their background, can test themselves against their peers. It should offer a chance for anyone to join a like-minded community, where it is the colour of their shirt that matters, not the colour of their skin.

Discrimination and racism run counter to all these things, and if we allow them to creep into sport, we will lose what makes sport so inspirational for so many people across the world. Like Members from across the House—the hon. Lady mentioned this—I was appalled by the racist chants directed at England football players in Montenegro in March. International competitions should bring cultures and countries together and we should see meaningful sanctions for the culprits when they are used to spread hate.

The United Kingdom has been a leading voice on this globally and we will keep making that case to international governing bodies. If we are going to make that argument, we also need to make sure that we are doing whatever we can to combat discriminatory behaviour at home. I have been just as appalled by reports of discrimination in domestic and grassroots sport.

It is true that over the past few decades there has been much work to combat discrimination and create a positive and welcoming atmosphere in our stadiums. The Football (Offences) Act 1991 has helped to tackle discrimination in football. Stadiums are now better equipped with CCTV, helping real-time identification of discriminatory behaviour if it occurs. However, unless we continue to root out discrimination in all its forms, we will always face the risk that it might return. In recent months, we have seen a series of unacceptable incidents in English stadiums that threaten to set back the progress we have made. Whether they are a player, a manager or a supporter, no participant in sport should have to tolerate discrimination of any kind.
We recognise that other forms of discrimination, such as homophobia, antisemitism and sexism, can be prevalent in sport, so we are working with a number of bodies, including Stonewall, Macabbi GB and Women in Football, to ensure that all discriminatory behaviour and cultures are challenged in local, national and international sport. We are bringing together everyone with an interest to discuss a way forward. In February, the Minister for Sport and Civil Society brought together administrators, campaign bodies, fan representatives, players and managers for a landmark summit. It was agreed that there was a number of ways in which improvements could be made, from support for match stewards to improving incident reporting. Only through the combined efforts of local police forces, clubs and stewards will these offences be picked up and dealt with in the appropriate manner. We are planning to announce a series of next steps before the end of the summer.

Jeremy Wright: I certainly do agree. It is important for more women's sport to be broadcast. I think that we are taking steps in the right direction. The England-Scotland football match—I am sorry to remind the hon. Member for Livingston (Hannah Bardell) of it; I will not mention the result—was watched by about 10% of our population. It is important for us to get the message across to broadcasters not just that broadcasting women's sport is the right thing to do but that, if they broadcast it, people will watch it.

Hannah Bardell: I am happy to congratulate England on their 2-1 win, although I have to say that it was a very dubious penalty.

The Secretary of State speaks positively about the action that we should be taking on homophobia and discrimination in sport. I want to share something with the Minister for Sport and Civil Society brought together administrators, campaign bodies, fan representatives, players and managers for a landmark summit. It was agreed that there was a number of ways in which improvements could be made, from support for match stewards to improving incident reporting. Only through the combined efforts of local police forces, clubs and stewards will these offences be picked up and dealt with in the appropriate manner. We are planning to announce a series of next steps before the end of the summer.

Jeremy Wright: I agree with the hon. Lady. Not only is that offensive, but it is wrong. I watched that match. It was a good game of football. I think that sports...
fans—real sports fans—will have enjoyed it, and I think that more of them should have the opportunity to do just that.

The summit in February also highlighted the fact that one of the strongest ways in which to promote diversity and inclusion in sport is to give more opportunities to those from under-represented backgrounds. That applies at all levels, whether it means ensuring that we have representation for top-level coaching staff or ensuring that young people from all backgrounds have an opportunity to take part in their favourite sports.

I welcome the English Football League policy to make sure BME first team manager candidates will get additional opportunities to be considered for roles at the highest levels. Sport England has also been investing £2 million each year to increase the number of qualified coaches in the game, with a particular emphasis on supporting bursaries for BME coaches. And through our sports governance code launched in 2017, we are aiming for greater diversity on the boards of our national governing bodies not just because it is the right thing to do but because diversity of thought leads to a higher quality of decision making. If our governing bodies are to fully reflect the communities they represent, we need to make sure they reflect the make-up of our society.

Let me say something about the role of social media. Social media has given many of our favourite sporting stars an opportunity to communicate directly with their fans. However, it has also created new avenues for abuse, where people can send vile remarks to top players, leading to some sportspersons closing their accounts and deciding to step away from social media for good. It should be an immense sadness to us all that professional footballers felt the need to boycott social media for 24 hours to protest against the toxic atmosphere that they experience on these channels. If we surrender our online spaces to those who spread hate, abuse, fear and vitriolic content, we all lose.

Our recent “Online Harms” White Paper was a world first, setting out the steps we are taking to make the UK the safest place in the world to be online. We set out how we will create a new duty of care establishing that companies have a responsibility for the safety of their users and must take reasonable steps to tackle harmful content and activity and that compliance will be overseen and enforced by an independent regulator with significant penalties available to it. Discriminatory abuse should be as unacceptable online as it is in the stadium. The internet must remain free, open and secure, and this Government will continue to protect freedom of expression online, but we must also take action to keep our citizens safe, especially those who face bigotry and discrimination online.

We are hosting some important sporting events over the next few years: the cricket world cup, the netball world cup, Euro 2020 matches and the Commonwealth games in Birmingham, aside from the competitions already mentioned in this debate and many more.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): And the rugby league world cup.

Jeremy Wright: Including of course the rugby league world cup.

Spectators will be visiting from far and wide, and viewers will be tuning in from across the world. We have these opportunities to demonstrate, just as we did during that summer of 2012, our nation at its best— hospitable, inclusive and welcoming to all—and to show the world that we reject racism in all its forms. We know we have further to go, but I believe that, as the hon. Member for Tooting said, sport is fundamentally a force for good: it brings us together; it can improve physical and mental health; and it can provide valuable leadership skills and promote social integration. We need to face down racism and discrimination together and show that it cannot be tolerated in any sport, at any level.

7.48 pm

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): I am delighted to take part in this evening’s debate—and for a change I really do mean that! Like many in the Chamber and millions across the UK, I know that sport, as a participant, a fan or even officiating, is a huge force for good—although my Paisley rugby club teammates will find that last point a little bizarre given that my treatment of referees was more akin to that in football than in rugby. None the less, we appreciate everyone who gets involved, and I too want to wish Scotland and England all the very best in the women’s World cup, particularly Shelley Kerr’s Scotland squad. I was delighted to be present on Sunday to watch the game and congratulate the team on its fantastic performance—indeed, second-half victory; if it had not been for a dodgy VAR decision in the first half we would have had a point out of the game, so it was a moral draw. I wish the team all the best for Friday; I am sure the players will take care of business and get back to winning ways.

For participants, sport promotes the benefits of teamwork and discipline and keeps us fit and healthy—or it should do—both physically and mentally. For players and fans, it brings us together socially. In short, sport unites us as people, regardless of background or beliefs—or at least it should do. The vast majority of the time, the benefits I have just outlined hold true, but occasionally, and in some places more than others, ignorance and hate rear their ugly heads. Whether it is racism, homophobia, sexism or bigotry, in sport we generally find that it does not matter to the type of fans who mete out this outdated and abhorrent abuse. The abuse is interchangeable, and it is directed against the other—the person or player who is different from them. These Neanderthal performances—indeed, second-half victory: if it had not been for a dodgy VAR decision in the first half we would have had a point out of the game, so it was a moral draw. I wish the team all the best for Friday; I am sure the players will take care of business and get back to winning ways.

Sport must be an inclusive environment so that everyone, regardless of creed, colour, sex or religion, can come together without fear or prejudice. That being said, this is not sport’s problem alone. The problem is still far too prevalent in our society, and far from decreasing, it is actually on the rise in our public discourse. As has been said, we have only to spend five minutes on social media to see the nameless and the gormless throwing racist, sexist and homophobic taunts, knowing that there will be no repercussions for them. The Rangers captain, James Tavernier, recently posted a screenshot of abuse that he had been sent—I will not read it out, but it is outrageous and abhorrent abuse. The abuse is interchangeable, and it is directed against the other—the person or player who is different from them. These Neanderthal performances—indeed, second-half victory: if it had not been for a dodgy VAR decision in the first half we would have had a point out of the game, so it was a moral draw. I wish the team all the best for Friday; I am sure the players will take care of business and get back to winning ways.

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Discrimination in Sport  
12 JUNE 2019 Discrimination in Sport

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): Justin Fashanu, a former player at my own club, Airdrieonians, was both black and gay, and the amount of abuse that he received might be one of the reasons—just one of the reasons, because this is almost a double-edged sword—that even these days there are no openly gay footballers. Does my hon. Friend agree with me on that, and will he place on record our immense gratitude to Justin Fashanu, who went through such a torrid time? I hope that he will pave the way for more footballers to have the comfort to come out.

Gavin Newlands: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for that intervention, because I have spoken about Justin Fashanu’s contribution before. The abuse that he received was shameful and it shames me. I remember that abuse very well as I was growing up. He did a fantastic job, and it is a shame that the abuse he received has led to the current situation where we do not have any players who are out and proud in the game.

I have said that racism is societal, and it stands to reason that it can and will present itself in all sports. Lewis Hamilton faced it in Spain a decade ago, and it took a decade of dominance by Tiger Woods to break down the barriers in the world of golf, in parts of the US at least. We should not be too pass-remarkable about these things over here, however, given that it is just in the past year or two that some of our own prestigious golf clubs have opened their doors to women.

On racism, Anthony Joshua has said: “Our parents’ generation has been sleeping”. He also said: “If someone is racist to me as a boxer, my natural instinct would be to punch him in his face and kick him while he’s down. But what I am going to do is to speak to you about who I am, where I’ve come from and what my lineage is about. I want to show you why the names and the slurs that you call me have no relevance to who I am as a person.”

That is real leadership from an inspirational individual—despite his recent defeat.

We have also seen leadership in football, as it is in football that we have seen racism far too often of late. I think we all praise the reaction of players such as Raheem Sterling and Danny Rose to their abuse. Their resolve and articulacy in calling out not only their abusers but the authorities for their meek reaction to abuse itself have been fantastic, but they must be better supported by bodies such as UEFA, which all too often issue paltry fines that amount to a pittance in the plate and address the issue.

As I have said, it is not just racism that is a problem. According to an EU-wide report, nine out of 10 LGBT+ people said that homophobia and transphobia were a problem in sport. Of those currently active in sport who had had negative experiences in the past 12 months, 49% of cases involved abuse that had come from their own team mates, while 36% of cases involved abuse from members of the opposing team. That is why movements such as the Rainbow Laces campaign are so important in making sure that our game is accessible to all. No one group of people owns the game. However, a bunch of politicians—although ones making good and consensual speeches—condemning this abuse will do absolutely nothing unless it results in action by the authorities. We need more preventive action, yes, but we also need more punitive action to punish offenders.

Discrimination has no place in sport, and the SNP Government in Scotland are determined to tackle it. Sport is an integral part of Scottish society, and as such, it should reflect society. In December 2017, the Scottish Government published their race equality action plan, outlining more than 120 actions that they would take over the course of the current Parliament to secure better outcomes for ethnic minorities in Scotland. There is no place for racism in our vision for Scotland, and the race equality framework has been developed with an understanding of the urgent need to avoid and eradicate institutional racism wherever it is found. The action plan shows that our leadership is advancing race equality and builds on the race equality framework was published in March 2016.

However, advancing equality is not just the job of Government alone. Everyone in society must play their part in removing the barriers facing our minority ethnic communities. I have spoken before about the great work of Show Racism the Red Card, and recent high-profile instances of racism in the game fly in the face of the fantastic work that is done such by organisations. Sadly, despite football swimming in money—in England at any rate—a relatively small amount is spent by the game on such initiatives. That needs to improve.

Show Racism the Red Card uses the role-model status of professional footballers to combat racism through education, and it has been operating in Scotland since 2003. As well as developing anti-racism education programmes, it produces a number of educational resources, including short films featuring interviews with professional footballers to be used in conjunction with the education pack and activities in classrooms and outside school. Such programmes need our support, and the Scottish Government have invested over £214 million since 2007 to promote equality and tackle discrimination.

Some progress had been made, but there is no doubt that problems remain in football. There are still issues with unacceptable conduct by supporters, particularly with sectarianism. The Scottish Government help to tackle sectarianism in the game in several ways, including direct funding to organisations and football banning orders. The Scottish Government have been engaging with the football authorities, leading clubs and other key stakeholders on this issue. As a result, new rules and guidelines on unacceptable conduct were introduced, and data on such conduct is now being collated by the SPFL and the Scottish FA for the first time, which is surprising to those of us who grew up following the game in Scotland, but it is progress none the less.

The Scottish Government will also introduce a new hate crime Bill and have just concluded a consultation on what should be included, a full analysis of which will be published imminently. The Scottish Government are also undertaking a full consultation on the findings and recommendations of the working group on defining sectarianism in Scots law. We recognise that legislation is not enough in and of itself to build the inclusive and equal society to which we aspire, but it forms the basis of understanding what is not acceptable in society.

While clearly a much smaller problem than it used to be, sectarianism still exists and is culturally and inextricably linked to football in Scotland. The question “What school did you go to?”—which essentially means, “Are you Protestant or Catholic?”—still gets asked, if not as much. I was raised Catholic and went to a Catholic
primary school, but I was also raised a Rangers fan by my father. In those days, few kids were bold enough to admit that they were a Rangers fan in a Catholic school—and vice versa. I assume—with maybe three or four at best. Suffice it to say, I was not bold enough to be one of them at the time, so I faked being a Celtic fan for five or six years in primary school before I had finally had enough.

Not only had I had enough of kidding on that I was a Celtic fan, I had enough of both of the teams. I was sick of the sectarian rubbish that I heard from both sides, including in primary school, and decided to support my own team, so I became a St Johnstone fan for complicated and convoluted reasons that I will not detain the House with tonight. It has been a long journey, but we have been doing pretty well over the past few years.

I was delighted to be shot of the Old Firm and sectarianism but, although I say that, you can never quite escape it. Following the 1998 league cup final at Parkhead, in which St Johnstone were defeated 2-1 by Rangers, I was attacked on the train home by a group of Celtic fans because St Johnstone “never tried hard enough to beat the huns”—their words, not mine.

As it happens, a few months prior to that, I had been walking home from a night out when two boys, who had been drunkenly singing Rangers songs, started walking with me and asking questions, the first of which was, “Which school did you go to?” I was not daft enough to say the name of the Catholic school I actually went to, but I could not persuade them that I had, in fact, gone to a non-denominational Protestant school. No matter what I said, they did not believe me and it escalated rather quickly into one of them pulling a knife from his jacket. Needless to say, I scarpered as quickly as my legs would take me. I had never been so pleased to have a turn of pace, as I did when I was 18 or 19 years old. I am not sure where that pace has gone, but I managed to get away from those boys.

Things have improved massively over the past few decades in Scotland, but the issue still hangs on in some corners of society. I do not want to end on a negative, and sectarianism, bigotry and racism—call it what you want—is not the taboo it once was. It is now out in the open and is being tackled head on. With the help of organisations such as Nil by Mouth, which campaigns to eliminate sectarian attitudes, and Show Racism the Red Card, Stonewall and many others, and through debates such as this one, we are educating the next generation to be rid of this discrimination whether it be in sport or anywhere else.

8.1 pm

Derek Thomas: I have just been handed an envelope, so I think I need to speak quickly.

I am not sure whether I need to declare this, but I recently became a trustee of the Cornish Sport Foundation, a new foundation that seeks to get to grips with the opportunities of sport and to address the important issues we are talking about this evening. I am grateful for the opportunity to speak in this debate on such an important subject, not just because we have a problem that must be resolved but because sport, as has been said, offers a solution.

I do not wish to rehearse the many important points that have been made, other than to say that we should never accept racist or discriminatory behaviour, and we must always work, using sport and whatever other tools we have, to rule out their existence. Sport offers a great tool to unite people and to improve fitness. I remember being at a football match many years ago—it was a long game that had gone into a bit of extra time—and, looking around, someone said, “There are 22,000 people here badly in need of exercise and 22 people out there badly in need of a rest.” This debate has reminded me of that story.

Sport also offers a tool to address inequalities and improve life chances, and I am pleased that the motion mentions the need for education. This will come as no surprise to the Secretary of State or the Minister, but what better example of a place for education than a stadium for Cornwall? That includes Cornish wrestling, or wrasslin, which we will hear about in the Adjournment debate.

I do not wish to diminish or take away from any of the important issues related to discrimination, racism or anything that happens against individuals in some sports and on some sporting occasions. We should never accept that, as I have said.

In Cornwall, there is a different type of discrimination, which I will briefly touch on. I am told that Cornwall is the only county without a big sporting arena or stadium. As the Secretary of State said, we should be working to give young people access to sport, partly because of education and all that comes with it—the way that young people grow and develop as human beings. I hope that we can soon resolve Cornwall not having access to that. We lack a stadium and the Football Foundation has already accepted that, because of its geography. Cornwall does not have good access, is discriminated against in the location of facilities and has not had the kind of money that other parts of the country have enjoyed.

Having said that, even without the facilities or the stadium, Cornwall has a great record. There are lots of elite sports personalities from Cornwall, and I will mention just a few, particularly because of the work they do.

Hannah Bardell: I hear what the hon. Gentleman says about a lack of sports facilities, but I know that he has a great coastline and many surfers. Does he agree that we need to see more about minority sports like surfing? Surfing is an up and coming sport that will be in the Olympics next year. In Scotland, 64% of our sports coverage in the media is of men’s sport, and only 2% of print media coverage in the UK is of women’s sport. We need to see a much broader range of sports being represented to break down those barriers of discrimination. Does he agree?

Derek Thomas: Of course, what the hon. Lady says is right. My entire constituency is surrounded by our immense coastline, as are the Isles of Scilly—it is a great chore for me to have to visit them from time to time! Gig rowing, kayaking, paddle boarding, kite surfing and surfing, which she mentioned, are all fantastic and they are important because they help people to know how to be safe in water. Again, on access and equality, they are expensive sports to do, whereas rugby and other sports provide more access because they can sometimes be much cheaper. However, these things are expensive in Cornwall because people travel great distances, sometimes with their young but talented children, to even get to Cornwall because people travel great distances, sometimes with their young but talented children, to even get to...
a decent pitch. They are even driving out of Cornwall from the far west, where I live, to engage, and we need to resolve this.

As I was saying, let me mention a few people who are celebrities in Cornwall. I could mention loads of others and I am going to get in trouble for not mentioning them all. Jack Richards was an England cricketer and he works with me on the sports foundation. Lucy Payne is a kickboxer who is celebrated in my part of the world. Helen Glover is an Olympian, whom Members will know. Jack Nowell is an England rugby player in my constituency. Melissa Reid is a triathlete who has been fantastic in breaking down the barriers that face so many people in sport. Then there is Sir Ben Ainslie, whom we all know. He came to speak to children at the beginning of the 2012 Olympics and just lit up Cornwall when it came to how accessible sports could be.

Let me make the case again on discrimination: sport gives people life chances, so that they know how they can and should support and accept each other, whatever they might be, wherever they might come from and whatever their differences. The right facilities also do that. Sport addresses health inequalities, and it provides the education, fairness and opportunity that we are arguing for. We are talking about celebrating elite Cornish sport and achievement. I welcome the comments the Secretary of State has made today about why it is so important to open up and offer access to everyone. Sport addresses health inequalities, and it provides the education, fairness and opportunity that we are arguing for.

I wish to make a few observations and a couple of suggestions about what we can do. I chair the all-party group on mountaineering—and, indeed, I set it up. The work we have done and the advice we have given, using our skills as politicians—the hon. Member for Macclesfield (David Rutley) has played a huge role in that over the years, as have many other Members—has given both confidence and a bit more expertise to that sport’s governing body, in expanding its scope and in dealing with its traditional bias, which was towards white men, with climbing and bouldering being a new Olympic sport one can participate in. Chris Bonington is still climbing into his 80s; we have great heroes of the sport. The sport has been opened up, and in recent years we have seen its first Asian president, Rehan Siddiqui, and women coming to the fore. Indeed, in the Olympics next year, with climbing and bouldering being a new Olympic sport, many of our medal prospects are young women, such as Shauna Coxsey, who have come up through the sport as it has opened up. It is making sure that it is making explicit efforts in respect of participation. It is making sure that there are paths through and giving resource and priority to opening up access and to encouraging participation, from the base level, with people like me, to the elite level. That is significant and we in the House can play a modest role in assisting that.

I have a bolder, much bigger proposal for the Secretary of State, the Sports Minister and the Government. This is a big one and it is doable. Football is desperately keen to have safe standing, and the Government are considering when and how it could be done. It is clear that the safety case has been proven to people’s satisfaction. Given what has been going on with the abuse of footballers, which is of course far worse at the grassroots level than at the elite level but has been brought to the fore by those prepared to be outspoken—the likes of Danny Rose, Raheem Sterling and other top footballers who are not prepared to take this rubbish any more—the Government could make safe standing in any one stadium conditional on the approval of a specific contract related to an action plan for dealing with discrimination in that stadium. The Government would then have the ability, as would external bodies and governing bodies, and external players in some communities, to hold to account those who run the sport.

If it was a premier league stadium with a capacity of, say, 60,000, a licence from the Government to give the club the ability to do what the fans and clubs say they want, with an agreement on precisely what they will do to deal with discrimination, would be significant leverage. In terms of tackling issues such as spectator abuse of those participating, given today’s technology, with stadiums that sell out tickets and with computerised ticketing and all the new technologies that are already there, that is eminently doable. In other words, do not give them something without asking for a little back, and the price is something to which they say they are already committed. That would be very smart leverage by the Government.

It would also allow the Government to hold the football authorities—the Premier League, the English Football League—to account for how they deal with these issues. Take the FA: I have raised some of the fines in this place and will not use up time repeating them again, but frankly the poor response to some of the worst offenders is comically bad, and of course that sends a huge message.

Another thing that we in the House can do is recognise good practice. We should try to spread best practice. When dealing with discrimination and racism, I am a strong believer in looking at what may be succeeding and telling others to copy it. Let me give an example from the premier league. Chelsea football club has launched a programme on tackling antisemitism, putting something without asking for a little back, and the price is something to which they say they are already committed. That would be very smart leverage by the Government.

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Let me give a second example. I intend to bring over—they are going to come—what I think is the best example in European football of how to deal with
problems among the fan base: people from German football and Borussia Dortmund. Like all German clubs, Dortmund employs fans—they are paid—as fans’ liaisons. They are not elected by the fans; they are chosen because of their expertise, including, explicitly, expertise in dealing with all forms of discrimination. That has been transformative for Dortmund; it has gone from being a club with a big problem to being a club with a small problem that does not tolerate any form of discrimination or abuse. It is about to build a £10 million fans’ centre, which will be a base for education, messaging and identifying the badge with the values of the club.

Dortmund is the best example, but there are others from Germany. I went to a fairly normal, non-controversial match in Bremen, at which there were 30,000 supporters. The fans threw out other fans for sexist language. Just think about that. Could you imagine that in any sports venue in the United Kingdom? That is way beyond where we are in this country. I am bringing over those Borussia Dortmund fan liaison officers and taking them round the clubs for meetings, hopefully in September. We hope to go to Scotland and to some of the bigger clubs. We will also meet people from the Football Association, and my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts), who chairs the all-party football group, has agreed to host a meeting of that group for the occasion.

How does the principle of employing fans work when Borussia Dortmund plays an away match with a premier league club in England? Who is looking for the fans who are misbehaving—for the racists? The liaison officers know who those fans are, because they are part of the family; it is their job to know. They know the travelling fans. It is very easy: if an away supporter acts inappropriately—say, shouts racist abuse—they do not get tickets again, so they do not go again. It is relatively easy.

As for the Government’s strengths, other countries would love to have the powers that we have, and our banning orders. Ask the Germans what they would like; they would love the same powers. Banning orders have been there for quite a long time; the Government should refresh them, so that whenever tickets go on sale and sell out, the idiot who is banned from any football stadium—perhaps any sports stadium—in the country will not be going in. They might be able to sneak into a local club in my area incognito, but they become the idiot who cannot go to the game with their peer group. The lesson from that for the rest of the group is huge. Whether banning orders are for a year, five years or 10 years, it is important that they be used. That principle, and the ability to tie this to restorative justice, would be incredibly powerful, especially if club officials from the fan base were specifically involved.

Those are practical examples. I could give others, but those are sufficient, in this time-limited debate. Let us learn from others, but also use our strengths—the levers we have as parliamentarians and that the Government have. If we did that, we could make a significant dent in the problem and bring about action to address the frustrations of Mr Sterling, Mr Rose, and the many others receiving this abuse, which, of course, at the grassroots, and in kids’ sport, is magnified many times; that is what I have seen across grassroots football, when I have investigated this issue for the FA, and it is the same in other sports. Good practice, and good examples, spread. We could do more relatively easily, and make significant changes. This debate is great for contributing to that.

8.19 pm

Dr Allin-Khan: I have the unexpected pleasure of responding to this debate.

Sport is a unifying force, a force for good. It has been incredibly moving to hear so much support across the House for something that we all agree is extremely important. We are proud that this House stands together tonight against the homophobia seen at pitches, on stands and at matches, and against xenophobia, racism and sexism.

The hon. Member for Livingston (Hannah Bardell) made a great intervention about social media companies, which need to do more. We all agree that they need to be held accountable. It is not okay that for years on end damaging and toxic tweets can remain accessible and online for all to read. I am glad to hear that the English Football League, the FA and the Premier League promote good behaviour and work to make a stand against abuse. However, I acknowledge the importance of education in tackling that from the bottom up, as well as from the top down.

My hon. Friend the Member for St Ives (Derek Thomas) made some interesting points and gave us the first mention of racism targeted at footballers. My hon. Friend the Member for Slough (Mr Dhesi) joined the Twitter boycott to protest against racism targeted at footballers. My hon. Friend the Member for Bassetlaw (John Mann) made some bold suggestions and rightly called for clubs to take responsibility. The hon. Member for St Ives (Derek Thomas) made some interesting points and gave us the first mention of wrestling this evening.

People know that I am a doctor—it is no secret—and I work on the frontline of our NHS. I see what gang violence does and how it damages our communities and ruins the lives of young people. It is also no secret that I am a boxer in my local community, and I see what sport can do to heal. Sometimes in debates in this place sport is not given the importance that it deserves, compared with issues such as Brexit—that is a fact. That does not mean that it is not of equal importance when we look at the transformative merits it possesses to change lives. I see that. As a humanitarian doctor, I have been in refugee camps where I have seen people wearing Man United shirts. They might not have food or security, but they proudly support a football team. That is something that no one can take away from them: they identify with a team.

Let us talk about communities. I am a Liverpool supporter, and I heard my friend on “The Anfield Wrap” talking about Mo Salah and how he has become such an important and integral part of the Liverpool community, the Liverpool family. He quoted: “Being Scouse is a state of mind.”

The importance of sport and physical activity cannot be overstated. I stand here with great pride tonight, joining colleagues from across the House to celebrate that sentiment. We face a time in which our community,
our society, is fractured—we have to be honest about that—but let us ensure that there is no room for those fractures to permeate the very thing that does so much to unite us.

We must also understand that discrimination in sport is not just about players on a pitch, or even about fans; it is also about what goes on in the boardroom. It is about understanding that we need representation from all groups at boardroom level—women, people from the black and minority ethnic community, and our LGBT brothers and sisters all need a seat at the table.

Tonight, I hope that everyone present unites with me to say that together we want to stamp out racism, sexism, homophobia and any form of discrimination in sport.

8.24 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Mims Davies): This has been a valuable and important debate as we lay bare how we must tackle racism and intolerance in sport at every level—from grassroots level up to the elite—because this is a truly crucial issue that faces this country. I am sure that, as we heard from the hon. Member for Tooting (Dr Allin-Khan), we are truly united in our determination to stamp out racism and bigotry wherever it rears its head. On what would have been Anne Frank’s 90th birthday, her words are stronger and more compelling than ever—we must never, ever forget where hate leads humanity. Some of the issues that we have touched on bring to life the challenges faced by the sector and by all of us across sport and, as we heard from the Secretary of State, civil society.

Before I continue, I would like to wish Chris Froome well. He has had multiple serious injuries in a crash this evening that could rule him out of the Tour de France. I hope all is well with him.

Why do we need to get this right? Well, over the next three years, the eyes of the world will be upon us. Indeed, they already are when it comes to the cricket world cup. We have the netball world cup, and Birmingham 2022 in three years’ time. I met representatives of Yorkshire cycling; what is happening in Harrogate this September is very exciting. We have the diving world series and the rugby world cup warm-ups. I am conscious that I should mention the rugby league world cup for Mr Deputy Speaker. We have the Solheim cup and the opportunities that provide for women’s golf. I could go on, because we are absolutely in the right place as regards hosting and showcasing these events.

Let me turn to some of the comments made during the debate. The hon. Member for Tooting talked about the sexism and intolerance seen on social media, particularly with regard to broadcasters and abusive tweets—“getting a slap”. This is just not acceptable, as we heard from the hon. Member for Livingston (Hannah Bardell), who talked with passion, as ever. That view continues to unite us, and we must all strive to work together to stamp it out. I, too, pay tribute to Gareth Thomas and to Justin Fashanu. The ability of players, such as Joe Root, to be out and proud and to speak out is absolutely vital for their games to thrive. This would not be acceptable in any other workplace, and we will not see it in sport. We will support everybody who rightly calls it out.

In response to my hon. Friend the Member for St Ives (Derek Thomas), sport absolutely can address inequalities. Whether it is an arena or a stadium, the inspirational opportunity provided by getting facilities is vital. I have directed Sport England to work closely with the stadium developers in Cornwall to help them to improve their business case. The significant expertise that we have in this area has been very helpful. I continue to monitor the feedback to make sure that that business case is managed.

The hon. Member for Bassetlaw (John Mann) made a characteristically passionate speech. I met him recently, and I know that he is bringing lessons from football around the world to the Department. If we do not get to every single piece of intolerance, including the sexist language that makes families feel not included, then we are absolutely missing a trick. Alongside the Secretary of State, this Government will work to hold the football authorities to account, tackling intolerance but also some of the other challenges that the hon. Gentleman mentioned around the experience of fans, including safe standing. We will keep the House updated on that.

I am very pleased, as ever, to hear from MPs who continue to affirm that there should be zero tolerance of discrimination. I have listened to, and had emails and tweets from, people who want to know that we have a real determination to ensure that sport continues to be welcoming.

There is absolutely no place in football or any sport for racism and race-related crime—I have said that before at the Dispatch Box, and I will take every opportunity to say it again. Bigotry and intolerance cannot be allowed under the cloak of football. It is not right when it is online, and it is not right offline. We do not want it. These are not fans. We will not give the good fans the embarrassment of calling these people that, because they do not deserve it. Our sports clubs and fans continue to embrace diversity and tackle racism. We have heard tonight about Chelsea’s work, and I applaud the work that Brighton have done on tackling homophobia.

We have set out a clear ambition—we heard it from the Secretary of State—for how we will combat all forms of discrimination, whether online or offline. We have a key duty of care in the “online Harms” White Paper, which will require companies in law to take steps to protect users from harm and abuse on their platforms. As the Secretary of State said, it will be overseen and, more importantly, enforced by an independent regulator.

If we get this right, there is everything to gain. We cannot have a situation online that is not matched offline. We know that racism and intolerance is not of sport’s making. We need to ensure that there is no disproportionate opportunity for its impacts to be suffered on the sports field. It is wrong for that to be allowed to happen.

There is much to say about the summit that I held earlier this year, and I will update the House on it soon. I want to finish by making it clear that at the heart of this Government’s sports strategy, “Sporting Future”, is our desire to be at the forefront of equality and fully support a zero-tolerance stance of inappropriate behaviour. I am determined that in any sporting event on our shores, we will be at the forefront of equality. We will be world-leading in the environment that both players and spectators can expect, and we will reject racism, intolerance and bigotry in every single form.
That this House notes with concern that levels of discrimination across sport remain unacceptable; considers that a combination of tougher sanctions against offenders, action by social media companies and better education are key to driving discrimination out of sport; and calls on the Government to hold social media companies to account on this issue.

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

8.31 pm

Scott Mann (North Cornwall) (Con): Good evening, Mr Deputy Speaker. Meur ras—thank you—for allowing me to speak in the debate. The people of Cornwall will be saluting you.

I come from a part of the country that has a very proud history and culture. Our population dates back to the stone age and is steeped in history and lore, particularly in mining and fishing. Some of our ancient traditions still exist today. Every year in Cornwall, people participate in the ancient tradition of hurling through the streets, and in the merry mornings of May, the ‘Obby ‘Osses descend through the streets of Padstow. In recent times, we have seen a huge resurgence in the sport of gig rowing. We are proud in Cornwall to be home to those historical cultural events, which are unique to our county.

Today, I wish to shine a spotlight on Cornish wrestling. I will, if I may, refer to Cornish wrestling in the Cornish tongue for the rest of the debate—I will be referring to wrestling as “wrasslin”. That is how we describe it in Cornwall. I have had a large number of media requests about this debate, which I was not expecting.

Cornish wrasslin bears no relation to the wrestling that people may have seen on television. It is not WWE. There are no ropes, nothing to jump off and no cage fights or tag teams. The sport of wrasslin in Cornwall sums up the Cornish very well. It is a game of power, skill and strength. Cornish wrasslin is a form of wrestling that has been established in Cornwall for several centuries. It is a unique sport that has witnessed a steady revival since the establishment of the Cornish Wrestling Association in 1920.

The history of wrasslin was recorded first in “The History of the Kings of Britain” in 1139, in which Geoffrey of Monmouth suggested that Corineus, the medieval legend, wrestled a Cornish giant named Gogmagog at Plymouth Hoe. Two Cornishmen were recorded in a poem of 1590 entitled “Poly-Olbion” at the battle of Agincourt, carrying a banner of two Cornish wrasslers in a hitch or a hold. In the 17th century, historian Richard Carew wrote of Cornish wrestling: “Wrasslin is as full of manliness, more delightful and less dangerous” than hurling. I can just imagine two burly Cornishmen, with hands the size of shovels, striding out into battle at Agincourt, proud of their sport and proud of their county.

In more recent times, we have seen a mini-revival. Both Devon and Brittany have a history of wrasslin, and they have competed with Cornwall in inter-Celtic matches. Cornish wrasslin is the oldest sport in the British Isles, and alongside hurling it is the oldest sport indigenous to Cornwall.

The objective of Cornish wrasslin is to throw the challenger from a standing position, with no grappling or holding on the ground. A bout begins when the competitors grab each other’s jackets by the collar, lapel or sleeve, in what is known as a hitch. To win the bout, the competitor must score a back. A back is scored by...
throwing the opponent on his or her hips or shoulders. There are four pins on the back of the jacket, and three have to touch the ground to score a back and win the contest. A single pin touching the ground only counts as one point but can be accumulated and scored at the end.

There are many different techniques and throws to defeat an opponent and score a back. Crooks and heaves are the most popular. Crooks are a variation of a trip, to catch an opponent off guard, while heave are used by heavier, more powerful wrasslers to lift their opponent in the air and fling them on their back.

The wearing of canvas jackets is essential and makes gripping easier, and competitors also wear shorts and socks. One crucial thing to keep in mind is that strength is not the main contributing factor to wrasslin. Many techniques and moves can be deployed to get a back. In fact, competitors from Devon are said to have used more kicking, which has not always gone down particularly well with the Cornish.

One of the most famous encounters between wrasslers from Devon and Cornwall must surely be the great wrasslin bout of 1826. Any match between Devon and Cornwall was almost always hotly disputed and always bore a prudely grudge, and this was no exception. James Polkinghorne was due to meet Abraham Cann. James Polkinghorne was born in the St Keverne and was usually associated with St Columb, for it was here that he was the landlord of the Red Lion inn. He set forth to uphold the honour of Cornish wrasslin when he took on Cann the challenger.

The match was to find the champion of the west of England and it took place at Tamar Green in Devonport on 23 October 1826. The ultimate result has never been agreed and it remains a matter of controversy to this day. It was from St Stephens that James Polkinghorne set off, in his gig rowing boat, on a long trip with his brother to Tamar Green. Information about the controversy surrounding the event from the outset can be found in an article on the heyday and decline of wrasslin. In 1960, the late Leslie Jolly, a recognised authority on wrasslin, wrote in a Cornish gazette that he wondered whether Polkinghorne was the right person to take on the challenger Cann. Jolly's grandfather, of Penscowen, St Enoder, was a renowned wrassler during the early part of the 19th century, and he made the case that Parkyn of St Columb Minor would have been a better representative. Parkyn had been champion for 20 years, but he was 52 and Polkinghorne a mere 38. Parkyn's claims were supported by some involved in the sport, including in St Columb, but nevertheless it was Polkinghorne who eventually went across the Tamar.

Cornish wrasslin has not always had a good name. Before the sport's governing body was founded, there were all sorts of things going on in Cornwall. The attraction of wrasslin brought about a bout in Bodmin. One of the competitors entered the ring and threw two roach men. That success was immediately followed by an attack by the Bodmin men, which led to a general riot. The contenders congested in a pugilistic style, the combatants armed themselves with bludgeons from the wooden rickshaw in the church town, and a fight ensued. Heads were laid open, teeth knocked out and the battlefield was quickly strewn with the maimed.

During the 1930s and 1940s, several members of the Chapman family achieved great wrasslin success. Grandfathers, fathers and sons all fought. Many Cornish towns and villages held tournaments, and hundreds would turn up to watch the contests. The Hawkeys and the Warnes were also well-known wrassling families, but the most famous competitor of the day was the heavyweight champion, Francis Gregory of St Wenn.

Gregory had his first match when he was 13 and he was the youngest Cornishman to show his skills at the London Palladium in 1927. He represented Cornwall seven times from 1928 at the official Cornu-Breton championships. He won seven times, on four occasions in Brittany. Later, he moved north and changed his sport to play rugby league for Wigan and Warrington and was capped for England. Taking up professional wrestling, he became known as Francis St Clair Gregory, and in November 1955 he made his first appearance in a wrestling match shown on British television.

More recently, in the face of fierce competition and promotion, Cornish wrestling waned to a small group of stalwarts. To put a stop to the decline and help raise awareness, in 2004, the Cornish Wrestling Association became affiliated with the British Wrestling Association. Publicity increased and training sessions took place in Helston, Truro and Wadebridge. Those measures have helped wrasslin make a strong comeback. Based at St Columb Major, today Ashley Cawley is the current Cornish heavyweight champion. He is also the Cornish Wrestling Association's public relations officer, while his uncle, Mike Cawley, is the association chairman. Ashley's father, Gerry, came out of wrestling retirement and won two championships recently.

Over the summer months, the Cornish Wrestling Association runs tournaments in villages and towns across the duchy. They also feature at the Royal Cornwall Show. All ages are welcome to participate and there are several children's categories. There is now a plaque in St Columb Major to commemorate the fight between Polkinghorne and Cann. The contests are overseen by three referees called sticklers, who award the points.

It is thought that Cornish wrasslin evolved the way it did because it is safer for wrestlers to land on their backs. The wrestlers are taught to grip tight and to avoid putting their arms down to soften the blow.

Wrestlers swear an oath in Cornish before wrasslin. The translation is:

"On my honour and the honour of my country"—

I think they probably mean Cornwall there—

"I swear to wrestle without treachery or brutality and in token of my sincerity, I offer my hand to my opponent."

I will give the Cornish a go:

"Gwary whec yu gwary tek".

which means, "Good play is fair play".

While it has been good to give the Minister a tour d’horizon of Cornish wrasslin this evening, I have some specific asks for her. Perhaps next time she passes through Cornwall, she would like to take me on in a bout of Cornish wrasslin. Given the current environment, perhaps the quickest way to sort out the leadership contest is to put everybody in a Cornish wrasslin ring and let them duke it out and find out who is the strongest contender.
My first objective is to raise the profile of this wonderful traditional sport. I hope that we have managed to do that through the debate. Secondly, I seek the Minister's support in getting help from Sport England to recognise Cornish wrasslin as a defined sport. That would allow Celtic tournaments between Brittany and Cornwall to continue. Sport England generously gave Cornwall £9,000 in 2012, and I hope that we can restore some of that funding.

Thirdly, the Commonwealth games are taking place in Birmingham, and there has been Greco-Roman wrestling in previous Commonwealth games. We have a chance to showcase all that is great about the British Isles. Will the Minister therefore help me to lobby the Commonwealth games committee either to put Cornish wrasslin in future Commonwealth games or to allow our fantastic sportsmen and women who do Cornish wrasslin to have a spot at the opening ceremony to demonstrate how good the sport is?

I hope that I have provided some entertainment in talking about a sport that I care passionately about. I hope that the debate has showcased Cornish wrasslin.

8.44 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Mims Davies): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for North Cornwall (Scott Mann) on securing this debate on Cornish wrasslin. I was just wondering—my hon. Friend the Member for Horsham (Jeremy Quin) mentioned it, too—whether my hon. Friend the Member for St Ives (Derek Thomas) sat next to my hon. Friend. My hon. Friend the Member for North Cornwall to see whether there would be a bout afterwards. We shall see very shortly. I very much enjoyed hearing about the heritage of this interesting sport. Most of the historical stories I have heard previously have been in the Tea Room. I am glad to hear all about wrassolin tonight. I thought my hon. Friend gave his speech without a hitch—if I have that right.

It is clear that this sport means a great deal to those present and to the communities from which it originated, which is great to see. The media interest that my hon. Friend has had might give him an insight into the media interest in life as a Sports Minister. It has certainly given me an insight over the past few weeks and months into quite how much interest there is, rightly, in sport. I thank the hon. Members in the Chamber who have listened to the debate and are wondering where they can use this in their own constituencies.

I cannot say that I have yet had the opportunity to personally take part in this ancient and noble art. However, I have noted the invitation. As my hon. Friends and other hon. Members will know, I am a passionate advocate for new and different sports. Yes, this is on my list to at least look at. I am not sure I am going to try it, but I will take a close look at it.

Cornwall is part of the country steeped in tradition and history, which manifests itself in so many ways: in the culture, in the language, and of course in its sporting history. It has been fascinating to hear about the many interesting facets of Cornish wrasslin and how it has developed as a sport. From Agincourt to riots to rickshaws to teeth being knocked out, it is clear that this sport has been popular and truly fascinating over a number of years. I am sure that this debate will in some way boost the sport. I hope that more youngsters will be able to understand that experience in all its vitality and history. It is fantastic to see how the sport has been handed down over many generations. That is typical of our sports and it is one of the joys of sport. It is a warming tradition that continues.

Let me, as my hon. Friend did, talk about the value and power of sport to our communities. Since I took on the job of Sports Minister, one of my key priorities has been to make sure that absolutely everyone is able to enjoy sport and physical activity. I think we are all extremely well versed in the benefits of sport and physical activity. That is reflected in the five outcomes of the Government’s sporting future strategy: physical wellbeing, mental wellbeing, individual development, social and community development, and economic development. I am totally committed to delivering those five outcomes for absolutely everyone. As my hon. Friend the Member for St Ives will remind me when it comes to a stadium for Cornwall, access to that is vital.

Everybody should be able to enjoy the benefits that sport and physical activity can bring. It should also, as we have heard tonight, be fun. It should be inclusive and there should be no barriers to taking part or feeling welcome. We want at least half a million more people to be regularly active across England by 2020, with at least half of them women. We are making good progress, but we must do more. Since we launched the strategy in 2015, we have recognised that this is about long-term change. This is about habits that exist over the long term. Physical activity has a massively positive impact on our nation’s health and wellbeing. It can reduce the risk of chronic diseases, and tackle health conditions such as diabetes and heart disease. There are ever-increasing pressures on our health and social care systems, particularly in Cornwall. The evidence shows that referrals to exercise classes, sports groups, ballroom dancing or indeed wrasslin can help people’s physical and mental wellbeing—as long as you keep your teeth.

It is extremely important to me that everyone, regardless of their background, age or where they live, can find a sport that is right for them and stick with it, getting active and staying active, whether through wrestling, wrasslin, dancing or football. We need to get young people involved in physical activity. There are still stubborn inequalities when it comes to taking part in sport; girls, certain black, Asian and minority ethnic groups, those with a disability and those with hidden disabilities are under-represented. It is clear that we need to continue to encourage more adults and children to take part in sport and physical activity and, as we heard tonight, it must be fair, safe and welcoming. The point about the Cornish wrasslin motto was absolutely right:

“Good play is fair play”.

What a fantastic message for all those in sport or who are considering taking it up. The basis of good sport is fairness. It is simple but absolutely true, and experience shows that if we get fair and welcoming sport or physical activity, we absolutely benefit.

On Sport England and grassroots funding, the investment of £9,000 helped with the school taster days, which saw several hundred children taking part. Sport England also funded some new equipment, including mats and jackets, to encourage a new generation of Cornish boys and girls to experience the sport. I am sure that, like me, it will have heard the plea.
In the last five years, Sport England has invested £7.3 million in projects in Cornwall, with the aim of getting more people physically active. We have heard about other sports. The Bude Surf Life Saving Club in North Cornwall is helping to get more women involved and it received £9,000, which seems like a lucky figure in Cornwall. Sport England has also invested over £75,000 of its community asset fund in Newquay Town Council to help with the skate park and to help to provide broad opportunities to get active. We need to shift the dial—sorry, I am falling over a pen here; that is nearly a sporting injury—when it comes to all our communities getting active and staying active.

In conclusion, I thank my hon. Friend the Member for North Cornwall for securing this debate and for allowing us to reflect fully on the benefits of sport and physical activity and on what sport and a connection to a community means. He mentioned the Commonwealth games. I am not in a position to commit to including wrasslin in a future games, but I am sure that those devising the start or the end of the showcase will have heard that point and I will of course mention it to them. We will certainly explore the opportunities to showcase those slightly different sports as part of our sporting and cultural programme. What is not to like about that?

I thank everyone who has been present to talk about the enjoyment of sport in the two debates tonight and the importance of different opportunities. I hope that wrasslin continues to grow, adds more participants far and wide and includes some of the under-represented groups that I spoke about this evening. I wish the sport and all those involved the very best—and I may, bravely, try it out for myself.

Question put and agreed to.

8.52 pm

House adjourned.
Oral Answers to Questions

TRANSPORT

The Secretary of State was asked—

Transport Connectivity: North of England

1. Judith Cummins (Bradford South) (Lab): What steps his Department is taking to improve transport connectivity in the north of England. [911316]

The Secretary of State for Transport (Chris Grayling): Mr Speaker, as you know, we have a big programme of investment in transport across the north, after decades of underinvestment. That includes replacing every single train in the north of England, getting rid of the long-outdated Pacer trains, buying new trains for the Newcastle upon Tyne Metro and investing nearly £3 billion in the road network in the north, including an extensive smart motorways programme. The Transforming Cities funds are delivering to individual cities the opportunity to improve metro systems.

Judith Cummins: The Secretary of State may have seen that newspapers across the north have come together again this week to call on the Government to commit to a series of policy changes to power up the north. Towns and cities, villages and hamlets—despite our diversity, the north stands as one to call for more powers and more funding. At the heart of that must be the transformative new rail network linking the great north cities, including Bradford. Will the Secretary of State grasp this moment and make Northern Powerhouse Rail a priority, with a city centre station in Bradford?

Chris Grayling: First, Northern Powerhouse Rail is a manifesto commitment for this Government. The work is being done at the moment to take it forward. Indeed, as the hon. Lady should be aware, in the past few days we have published further details of the interchanges between Northern Powerhouse Rail and HS2, thus demonstrating further our commitment to that project.

With regard to Bradford, as the hon. Lady knows, I have had meetings with the council leader. I am extremely sympathetic to the need to ensure that Bradford is a proper part of the Northern Powerhouse Rail network.
with the region set to receive just a fraction of the investment to be made in London, and “northern powerhouse” has to be much more than a slogan. So will the Secretary of State take the opportunity to commit not only to electrifying the trans-Pennine route, but to matching Labour’s £10 billion-plus commitment to deliver a Crossrail for the north?

Chris Grayling: What I am not going to do is match Labour’s record of investment in the north, because it was lousy. The Labour Government spent nothing on trains, and did not upgrade railways in the north. We are upgrading roads in the north, and upgrading railways across the north. The trans-Pennine upgrade is the flagship—the largest investment programme on the railways in the next control period—and Labour Members have the brass neck to say that they are the ones with a plan. They did nothing; we are doing things.

Hammersmith Bridge

2. Zac Goldsmith (Richmond Park) (Con): If he will allocate funding to Transport for London for the repair of Hammersmith bridge.

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Michael Ellis): The maintenance of Hammersmith bridge is a matter for the London Borough of Hammersmith and Fulham. Neither the borough nor Transport for London has approached the Department to seek funding to repair the bridge.

Zac Goldsmith: I am very disappointed that they have not done so. I understand the temptation for the Government to see this as a local issue, but it is much more than that. Greater London has just 33 major crossings; this one took 20,000 cars and 1,800 buses a day, so its closure for up to three years is catastrophic for residents and businesses, and is causing mayhem in an already congested part of London. I was disappointed to hear what the Minister said about not being approached by the borough or TfL—that needs to change—but the Government also need to show a proper interest, so may I please urge him to look at the matter again?

Michael Ellis: Transport in London is, of course, devolved to the Mayor of London. I have been astonished and exasperated in just the last couple of weeks in the Department to see how badly run Labour London’s transport is, and I am astonished by the indolence of the Labour London Mayor, Sadiq Khan. Hammersmith bridge is being neglected—my hon. Friend is right about that—by the Mayor, who is asleep on the job.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): The Transport Secretary should have done his homework a little better. I have here a copy of my letter to him of 11 April—and his response of 21 May; no urgency there—asking for assistance with funding for Hammersmith bridge, on the reasonable grounds that he had taken £800 million from the subsidy to TfL and the previous Mayor of London had wasted more than £40 million on the garden bridge. Can we stop the party politicking? Will the Secretary of State do his job sensibly and support TfL and Hammersmith Council, which are working together to resolve this matter, instead of grandstanding in this way?

Michael Ellis: It is a little rich for the hon. Gentleman to refer to party politics. The fact is that Hammersmith bridge has been a project for London since 2015, and the Mayor of London has done nothing about it. The fact is that it is the responsibility of the London borough and Transport for London mechanisms. The hon. Gentleman does not want to admit the facts, but the facts are those.

Greg Hands (Chelsea and Fulham) (Con): It is now two months since the bridge closed, and the Thames is uncrossable for a remarkable three and a half-mile stretch. In that time, the London Borough of Hammersmith and Fulham has not yet even produced a report diagnosing the problems. All that it has done is have a row with Labour-run Transport for London over funding for work when it has not yet worked out what it needs. Will my hon. Friend agree to meet the Mayor of London and the council to bang heads together between the two warring Labour authorities and get the bridge open again?

Michael Ellis: We often see Labour authorities needing to have their heads banged together, because they are often at war, as they appear to be in this case. It seems to me that banging heads together in regard to this matter would be a good thing, and I will carefully consider my right hon. Friend’s request.

Cycling

3. Dr Sarah Wollaston (Totnes) (Ind): What steps he is taking to increase the uptake of cycling as a means of transport.

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Michael Ellis): The Government are committed to increasing cycling and walking, and to making our roads safer for cyclists and pedestrians. Spending per head on cycling and walking has more than trebled since 2010, and about £2 billion is now being invested in cycling and walking over the current Parliament. That is helping to fund new infrastructure in many towns and cities.

Dr Wollaston: I am sure that the whole House will wish to join me in wishing the very best to Chris Froome.

I welcome the removal of the cap from the Cycle to Work scheme, but many of the people who could benefit most from e-bikes are not in work. What will the Minister do to support the use of e-bikes and non-standard pedal cycles by older people and those with disabilities? Will he meet me to discuss how we can create a safer infrastructure to encourage such use, particularly in my constituency, where there has been a long-standing block to the Littlehempston to Totnes cycleway?

Michael Ellis: I shall be happy to meet the hon. Lady, and I extend similar sentiments to Chris Froome.

Investment has trebled since Labour was in office, thanks to this Government. In the past few days I have made two visits to support Bike Week, and I shall be making a Bikeability visit this afternoon. As a result of the Government’s £29 billion investment in roads, cycling is being supported, but, as I have said, I shall be happy to meet the hon. Lady to discuss the matter further.
Chris Law (Dundee West) (SNP): What steps is he taking to prepare UK ports for when the UK leaves the EU, and we continue to liaise closely with the devolved Administrations.

Mr Dowd: I am afraid that the hon. Lady needs to look again at the notes that have been placed in her hand, because she has contradicted herself in that statement. It is absolutely right and proper for the Government to work with the border delivery group to ensure that trade continues with minimum friction at UK ports. The Government shall take all steps necessary to ensure that vital goods continue to flow into the country when the UK leaves the EU, and we continue to liaise closely with the devolved Administrations.

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): We have heard from Ministers that there were high levels of friction in trade and that we were working with the border delivery group. It is, therefore, to Ministers’ deep disappointment to see that a significant number of companies are still unsure of what the state of trade will be at the end of October. The Secretary of State has previously said that there will be no cliff edge. What is his Department’s plan to avoid that cliff edge if the United Kingdom leaves the EU without a deal?

Ms Ghani: I welcome the question. I was at the inter-ministerial group, which I chair, with all the port authorities, and I met Associated British Ports just recently. It is working closely with us to prepare for no deal, and it is excited about the opportunities that we can put forward through Maritime 2050, our 30-year strategy for investment in our ports, both in technology and in our seafarers, to ensure that we are ready for our new opportunities.

Chris Law (Dundee West) (SNP): What steps he is taking to prepare UK ports for when the UK leaves the EU.

Ms Ghani: No-deal preparation carried out by this Department for freight capacity was just 1% of the overall budget for no-deal planning—1%.

Ms Ghani: I was hoping that the hon. Gentleman was going to talk up his own ports and the extra business that will become available once we have left Europe, considering how excited ports are about the further opportunities coming our way. As I mentioned earlier, it was right and proper that we prepared for no deal, and we were working with a number of Government Departments to make sure capacity was available. The question of capacity was not for this Department; it was for a number of other Departments. It is curious that the hon. Gentleman does not also reflect on what the Scottish Government wanted in place just in case they needed extra capacity as well.

Marion Fellows: So far the Secretary of State’s reckless actions on ferry contracts alone have cost £43.8 million in termination payouts to Brittany Ferries and DFDS, £800,000 in consultancy fees and £33 million to Eurotunnel, with P&O also expecting £33 million-plus legal fees to be added to the final bill, so the sum will be over £110 million. What is being sacrificed to pay for this, and when will the Secretary of State apologise?

Ms Ghani: I am pleased to say that I have been cycling this week, so I do not think it is just the brave who are going cycling. The average number of miles cycled per person has increased by 54% since 2002. The number of trips cycled has remained between 14 and 18 for the last 16 years, however, and we are putting massive investment into this area and will continue to do so.

Leaving the EU: Ports

4. Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): What steps he is taking to prepare UK ports for when the UK leaves the EU.

11. Chris Law (Dundee West) (SNP): What steps he is taking to prepare UK ports for when the UK leaves the EU.

17. Marion Fellows (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): What steps he is taking to prepare UK ports for when the UK leaves the EU.

18. Tonia Antoniazzi (Gower) (Lab): What steps he is taking to prepare UK ports for when the UK leaves the EU.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Ms Nusrat Ghani): The UK port sector is resilient and flexible, and is well placed to adapt successfully in preparation for Brexit. My Department continues to work with the border delivery group to ensure that trade continues with minimum friction at UK ports. The Government shall take all steps necessary to ensure that vital goods continue to flow into the country when the UK leaves the EU, and we continue to liaise closely with the devolved Administrations.

Hannah Bardell: Last month we learned that the National Audit Office warned the Transport Secretary in advance that there was a high likelihood of a successful legal challenge regarding the no-deal ferry contracts, which directly contradicts his previous responses on the subject, so when will he admit culpability and apologise for this reckless action, which has resulted in a hefty bill for the taxpayer?

Ms Ghani: I am afraid that the hon. Lady needs to look again at the notes that have been placed in her hand, because she has contradicted herself in that statement. It is absolutely right and proper for the Government to prepare for no deal, and that was exactly what we did to ensure that vital goods got into the country in case of a no-deal.
Ms Ghani: I do not know what to say—the hon. Gentleman is disappointed that the Secretary of State is not at the Dispatch Box, but this is my portfolio and I am pleased to be responding to his question.

If the hon. Gentleman was close to the maritime sector, he would be aware that we have been working with it for the past two years and that just this week we had the inter-ministerial group meeting with the port sector and I appeared in front of the all-party parliamentary group for maritime and ports. There is extensive dialogue and constant research to see what we need to do to continue to prepare, and if this arises again, come October, we will put preparations in place.

Karl Turner (Kingston upon Hull East) (Lab): We could be just four months away from a disastrous no-deal Brexit, yet the Government have put on hold their contingency plans. The Secretary of State’s previous efforts resulted in 89 lorries and a refuse truck pretending to be on convoy to Dover, when in reality that route takes 10,000 heavy goods vehicles a day. He doled out contracts to ferry companies that did not have any actual ferries, or the means to get them, with terms and conditions cut and pasted from a fast food takeaway. He also threw 33 million quid away in an out-of-court settlement, and there are potentially many more litigations coming down the track. Will the Minister please give us a clue as to the Secretary of State’s next great plans?

Ms Ghani: Our plans amounted to just 1% of the no-deal planning, and it was the right thing to do for the Government to prepare for all eventualities. We were responsible in putting together the freight capacity that would be needed for critical supplies, including for the national health service. If the hon. Gentleman is so nervous about no deal, he should support a deal.

Road Safety

5. Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): What steps his Department is taking to improve road safety.

6. Gerald Jones (Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney) (Lab): What steps his Department is taking to improve road safety.

14. Marsha De Cordova (Battersea) (Lab): What steps his Department is taking to improve road safety.

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Michael Ellis): In June last year, the Department issued a written statement to Parliament that reported progress on the actions from its road safety statement. The statement also outlined more actions, such as putting £100 million into improving 50 of the most dangerous stretches of A roads in England and committing to a refreshed road safety statement and a two-year action plan to address four priority groups: young people, rural road users, motorcyclists and older vulnerable users.

Liz McInnes: I thank the Minister for that answer, but last year 157 people were sentenced for causing death by dangerous driving. The average length of the sentence given was just over six years. Does he agree that if this Government had introduced life sentences for that crime, as they promised to do in October 2017, we might have seen a consequent improvement in road safety and fewer of those dreadful crimes occurring last year?

Michael Ellis: The Department and the Secretary of State take these matters extremely seriously, and a great deal of work continues to be done on the subject of road safety. Any deaths or injuries via drink-driving are of course totally unacceptable, and we will do everything we can to continue to mitigate that. The fact is that the Department has doubled the penalty points for improper use of a mobile phone while driving, and we have also been investing via Facebook in the Think! campaign. We continue to work across the board to mitigate these issues. We are in constant contact with the Home Office and the police service on this issue, and that will continue.

Gerald Jones: In August 2017, 22-month-old Pearl Melody Black from Merthyr Tydfil was killed after a runaway car hit a wall, which fell on top of her. The current legislation did not allow the Crown Prosecution Service to bring justice to my constituents, Paul and Gemma Black. I have written to the Secretary of State, to the Department and to Ministers and previous Ministers to request a meeting to see whether we can work together to bring about a change in the legislation so that other parents do not have to endure this in future. Will the Minister agree to meet me to see what can be done?

Michael Ellis: I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising that tragic case of the runaway vehicle. The decision to prosecute lies with the Crown Prosecution Service. It would be inappropriate for the Department for Transport to comment on its decision, but I would be happy to meet him. I can say that DFT officials have been in discussion with the CPS and the Ministry of Justice about the case and dangerous driving offences more broadly, and we will continue to monitor the situation.

Marsha De Cordova: Last summer, I welcomed the Government’s announcement of a moratorium on shared spaces—road designs that remove the physical divides between the road and footways. Those cause considerable danger for blind and partially sighted people, including me, even turning some roads into no-go areas for people with sight loss. Concerns remain about what will happen to current shared spaces and the Government’s plans for the future. Can the Minister confirm that the Government recognise that such shared spaces are unacceptably inaccessible, and will funding be made available to make sure that they are made accessible for blind and partially sighted people?

Michael Ellis: I thank the hon. Lady for raising the point, which the Department is cognisant of. Research is being done in Scotland on this subject, and we hope for some results from that in the next several months.

19. [911337] Scott Mann (North Cornwall) (Con): I welcome the Minister to his place. One of the best ways to improve road safety, improve air quality and reduce congestion is to get on with the major roads network fund. Cornwall Council has prioritised the Camelford bypass as its main contribution to this scheme, and I would welcome a meeting with him to discuss it.
Michael Ellis: May I take this opportunity to say how much I enjoyed my visit to my hon. Friend’s constituency while I was responsible for another portfolio some time ago? My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has been to see the local challenge for the Camelford bypass and is therefore visibly sighted on it. It has much merit, and I am happy to meet my hon. Friend. My officials are working with Cornwall Council to assess the scheme so that a decision can be made as soon as possible, and I hope that it will get on and submit it.

Ben Bradley (Mansfield) (Con): I welcome my hon. Friend’s mention of improvements to A roads. The most problematic A road in my constituency has had several visits from the Secretary of State. Detailed plans for improvements to what is known as the Sainsbury’s junction are with the Department: can the Minister update me on progress?

Michael Ellis: I understand there will be an opportunity to bid for funding on that matter shortly.

Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab): I welcome the Minister to his new role. I hope that he will bring the same enthusiasm, especially for cycling and walking, as his predecessor, and I am sure that he is looking forward to appearing before the Transport Committee. Yesterday, our Committee was told that the Government need to change their approach to public education on using a mobile phone while driving if they are to fulfil the Prime Minister’s ambition of making that offence as socially unacceptable as drink-driving. Will the Minister commit to taking action to increase public awareness of the risks of driving while using a mobile phone, whether handheld or hands-free, which we were told reduces motorists’ capability to that of a brand-new driver. It is the equivalent of being at the drink-drive limit and makes a road traffic collision four times more likely.

Michael Ellis: It is very kind of the hon. Lady to invite me to appear before her Committee: I think that something is already in the diary.

On cycling, I have already spoken to Transport for London about that. I have been on a bike several times this week and will be again later.

On the important issue of mobile phone use while driving, the Department has been working extremely hard: we have increased the penalty points from three to six, and we have put a lot of investment into social media to warn users of the dangers, and we will continue to do so.

Public Transport

6. Jessica Morden (Newport East) (Lab): What steps he is taking to encourage greater use of public transport.

The Secretary of State for Transport (Chris Grayling): Local bus journeys remain central to transport choices, accounting for around 59% of all public transport journeys. The Bus Services Act 2017, introduced by this Government, gives local authorities tools to improve local bus services and increase passenger numbers. The Government spend around £2 billion a year supporting passenger road transport. We are also investing record levels in the UK rail network as part of the biggest modernisation programme for many decades.

Jessica Morden: I know from constituents who commute that far more needs to be done to improve capacity and make traveling by rail more affordable, to encourage people out of their cars, What will Ministers do to address the fact that Wales is set to get only 6% of planned UK rail spending, despite Welsh routes making up 11% of the network? As part of that, can we have a new railway station for Magor as part of the new stations fund?

Chris Grayling: On that latter point, I am aware of the interest of the hon. Lady’s constituents, and it is something we will look at very carefully. I hope she welcomes the Government’s substantial investment in improved rolling stock, improved capacity and improved speed on the Great Western main line, which will benefit her constituency and the whole economy of south Wales.

The hon. Lady also talks about transport investment. It is surprising that, in the past few days, the Labour Administration in Wales have backed away from a major upgrade to the M4, which, of course, is the most significant artery for south Wales and its economy.

Tracey Crouch (Chatham and Aylesford) (Con): Given yesterday’s announcement on legislating for net zero greenhouse gases, what steps is my right hon. Friend taking to decarbonise public transport?

Chris Grayling: We are taking a variety of different measures. In this country, we will shortly be seeing the first battery hybrid trains and the first hydrogen-powered trains, and we are providing support for low emission and ultra-low emission buses. Indeed, I recently went to the constituency of the Under-Secretary of State for Transport, my hon. Friend the Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough (Andrew Jones), to see the work that the local bus company is doing to introduce entirely electric-powered local bus routes. There is a huge amount happening, but of course there is a lot more to do to decarbonise the whole public transport sector and our road transport, too.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Has the Secretary of State had any discussions with the Treasury regarding a public transport voucher scheme that can be taken from pre-tax wages to encourage people to use public transport and thereby lower carbon emissions in our cities?

Chris Grayling: I have not, but I would be happy to discuss the hon. Gentleman’s concept. I am very interested in what he says.

Andy McDonald (Middlesbrough) (Lab): Bus services are in crisis. Since 2010, over 3,000 routes have been cut, fares have risen twice as fast as wages and bus use is in freefall. Last month, the cross-party Select Committee on Transport published a report on bus services in England outside London that recommended how to end this crisis, including allowing all local authorities to regulate or own their local bus services, providing concessions to young people and boosting funding. The report was led by the evidence. Will the Secretary of State listen to that evidence, accept the recommendations and make them Government policy?
Chris Grayling: Of course we will be responding to the report shortly, but if the hon. Gentleman looks across the country he will see that the place where bus mileage has been falling fastest is in Labour-controlled Wales. Actually, there has been a small increase in the number of routes during my time as Secretary of State. The Government are committed to supporting new, innovative ways to expand bus utilisation, which is why we support the demand-responsive services that are emerging across the country and are committed to ensuring that we provide the best possible choice for passengers.

The hon. Gentleman referred to the powers under the 2017 Act, and in my time as Secretary of State, I have not received a single proposal or request to introduce bus franchising under that Act. Notwithstanding that fact, I would be happy to do so if I saw evidence that it would improve passenger services.

East Coast Main Line: New Trains

8. Julian Sturdy (York Outer) (Con): What progress he has made on the roll-out of new trains for the east coast main line.

The Secretary of State for Transport (Chris Grayling): A comment was made earlier about investment in the north, and the Azuma trains, which will shortly be running to the north-east and Scotland and are already running in Leeds, are a huge investment in transport connections to the north. They will reduce journey times, and alongside that the substantial multi-hundred million pound investment that we are putting into the east coast main line will improve journey times, too. That is another sign of this Government’s commitment to providing better transport links in and for the north.

Julian Sturdy: I welcome that answer. The Secretary of State is right that the introduction of the new Azuma trains is an exciting development for the city of York, given the importance of the east coast main line to our great city, but can he assure me that we will have no further delays in their introduction? There have been signalling problems north of York, and the Azuma trains will be arriving in York on 1 August.

Chris Grayling: My understanding is that those trains are on track to start running as targeted at the start of August and will be going to Scotland later this year. They will deliver a transformative experience—more seats and faster, better journeys for people travelling from Scotland in the north to London and within the north, between places such as York and Newcastle. This is a really important investment.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): I hope that history will be kind about the right hon. Gentleman’s contribution to transport in our country. These trains were promised last December, and they are still not properly in service. When will we get them? Is he not concentrating totally on that waste of money called HS2, which is squandering the national treasure?

Chris Grayling: It is interesting that when I speak to civic leaders in the north, they all talk enthusiastically about HS2. The new trains are already operating and have been for several weeks. They have been operating, as intended, initially on the route to Leeds; they will start on the route to York, Newcastle and Leeds shortly; and later this year and/or early next year they will be in operation right the way up through Scotland. This is a huge investment in better transport for people all the way up the east coast.

Public Transport: London

9. Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): What recent discussions he has had with the Mayor of London on the provision of public transport in the capital.

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Michael Ellis): Transport in London is devolved to the Mayor. Ministers and officials in the Department for Transport hold regular discussions with representatives of the Greater London Authority, including the Mayor and deputy Mayor, on a range of transport matters.

Theresa Villiers: Will the Minister speak to the Mayor of London to urge him to reverse the reductions in service to the end of the Northern line, which sees more trains turning back at Finchley Central, thereby requiring people to change trains?

Michael Ellis: I am sorry to say that the Mayor of London is letting Londoners down in transport. He has cancelled investment projects that are his responsibility, cut bus and underground services and axed an extension to the Metropolitan line, despite the Government loaning £2.6 million to the Mayor through our Department. I am appalled that, despite that loan, Sadiq Khan is letting Londoners down.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): What steps has the Mayor of London taken to ensure the accountability of Network Rail to its customers?

Mr Speaker: Let us hear Newcastle’s view on the Mayor of London and the city of London.

Chi Onwurah: In those discussions with the Mayor of London, will the Minister seek his advice on why it costs more to take a bus four stops up the West road in Newcastle than it does to travel across the entire Greater London area? Will he advise the Minister for buses to apply that to the rest of the country, rather than cutting three quarters of a billion pounds from annual bus services?

Michael Ellis: One reason why the Mayor of London has a black hole in his budget is that he has not been running transport services properly. I am sure that the hon. Lady’s area will be doing a better job and will hope to do a better job.

Network Rail: Accountability

10. Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby) (Lab): What steps he is taking to ensure the accountability of Network Rail to its customers.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Andrew Jones): The Department sets the strategy for Network Rail. Its priority is to deliver a safe and efficient railway for passengers, freight customers and
the taxpayer. The Secretary of State and I regularly meet Network Rail on its financial performance and progress against the aims set out in its delivery plan. The “Putting Passengers First” programme is built around issues facing the industry. We are engaging with Network Rail as it implements this programme.

Melanie Onn: Can the Minister tell me of any other publicly funded body that provides a service to 500 people every day that can decide to close that service, as Network Rail has with the Suggitt’s Lane crossing, without any consultation whatsoever?

Andrew Jones: We had a very good debate on the Suggitt’s Lane level crossing only last week in Westminster Hall. Network Rail is accountable to the Secretary of State, but that does not mean that we can interfere or overrule its operational decisions. However, I have undertaken to meet Network Rail to ensure that it is aware of the views of the hon. Lady and my hon. Friend the Member for Cleethorpes (Martin Vickers). I met some of the people who had travelled down from the area to understand their views and will ensure that Network Rail is fully sighted on those views.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): Network Rail made a mistake when it demolished the Leyland bridge, which links my constituency and that of my hon. Friend the Member for Wellingborough (Mr Bone). I am pleased to say that, with the Minister’s help, it is going to be rebuilt, but will he help us to keep the pressure up and ensure that those works are completed as soon as possible?

Andrew Jones: I will be happy to keep up the pressure. I recognise what a long-standing issue this is for my hon. Friend’s area and how hard he has campaigned on it, and I would be very happy to help.

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): The Ebbw Vale to Cardiff line is a successful train service, but future improvements will require joint working between the Welsh Government, Network Rail and the Department for Transport, so will the Minister agree to meet me to help to secure extra investment for this crucial Valleys line?

Andrew Jones: I will of course happily meet the hon. Gentleman. The “Putting Passengers First” programme is all about greater collaboration and customer focus in the industry. I am happy to take that matter forward with the hon. Gentleman.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): As the hon. Member for Great Grimsby (Melanie Onn) pointed out, and as the Minister is well aware, residents in Grimsby and Cleethorpes are very angry about the closure of Suggitt’s Lane level crossing. I appreciate the Minister’s help and assistance, but the reality is that there is no real accountability on this issue. If the community cannot hold Network Rail to account through their elected representatives, surely it is now time to look again at the existing legislation.

Andrew Jones: My hon. Friend has campaigned vigorously on this issue, and I know that he chaired a meeting on 31 May between Network Rail and North East Lincolnshire Council to discuss the issue and options for alternative provision, with specific reference to the Fuller Street bridge. I understand that Network Rail has agreed in principle to contribute to the enhancement of that bridge, should it prove viable. The key point is to make sure that the views of all those involved are considered and that we come to a happy conclusion as quickly as possible. I am happy to work with all sides to help to achieve a positive outcome.

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): One thing that would help with Network Rail accountability would be the devolution of that responsibility to the Scottish Government. If the Conservative party is committed to devolution and strengthening the United Kingdom, when will it devolve control of Network Rail to the Scottish Government?

Andrew Jones: Devolution was not recommended as part of the broader review of powers, but I will of course make sure that the hon. Gentleman’s views are considered by the Williams rail review.

**Taxi Services**

12. Paul Blomfield (Sheffield Central) (Lab): What steps his Department is taking to improve the (a) safety and (b) regulation of taxi services.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Ms Nusrat Ghani): My Department is considering the responses to the consultation on draft statutory guidance, to be issued to licensing authorities, on how they should use their extensive existing powers to protect children and vulnerable adults when using taxis and private hire vehicles. The response to the report by the task and finish group on taxi and private hire vehicle licensing committed the Government—I am keen to do this—to bring forward legislation to enable national minimum standards in licensing, enable greater enforcement powers and establish a national licensing database to assist in the sharing of relevant information.

Paul Blomfield: The task and finish group to which the Minister refers made its recommendation last September. Five months later, the Government’s response was only that they would consider the recommendation. A further four months on, in a reply to a written question last week, the Minister could say only that they would continue to carefully consider the issue, with a view to legislating—you could not make this up, Mr Speaker—“when time allows”. Given the chaos of this Government, we have all the legislative time in the world. When are they going to act?

Ms Ghani: I can see that the hon. Gentleman is as keen as I am to legislate in this area. We responded to say that we would be looking at national minimum standards, national enforcement powers and a national licensing database. I really am keen to move forward on this issue as soon as I can, and I am just waiting for the most appropriate time to do so.

Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): The Minister knows what I am going to say, but I am going to surprise her, because this week, thanks to Steve McNamara and the Licensed Taxi Drivers Association, I had the chance to drive one of the wonderful new electric cabs in London. Is it conceivable that London will manage to electrify its taxis before the Government manage to bring forward the legislation?
Ms Ghani: I never want to lose out to the Mayor of London, so I hope that that is not the case. Greener taxis are on the agenda. Not only has the hon. Gentleman been incredibly supportive of this issue, but he has guided me in the putting together of our response to the task and finish group. As he knows, I really am keen to try to secure a date, and the fact that the matter has been mentioned multiple times this morning will help me to do so.

Weekday Train Services: Kettering

13. Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): What estimate he has made of the number of weekday train services northbound from Kettering on the main line under the (a) existing and (b) new train franchise.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Andrew Jones): Currently, on average, two East Midlands trains per hour call at Kettering northbound on weekdays, with one going to Corby and one to Nottingham. From December 2020, double the number of trains will call at Kettering: two will be on a dedicated St Pancras to Corby service and two will be on the long-distance Nottingham service.

Mr Hollobone: Kettering is a well-used, popular station with rising passenger numbers. Will the Minister confirm when electrification will arrive at Kettering and what other benefits to passengers there will be from the new train franchise?

Andrew Jones: The roll-out of the midland main line electrification is obviously a key project, and I will keep the House posted on its progress. I can inform my hon. Friend that the station will get many new benefits from the East Midlands franchise. They will include station wi-fi, LED lighting and help points. There will be improved lay-out and a bus interchange, a multimodal customer information system, drinking water fountains, customer lounges, refurbished toilets, new cafés, customer waiting areas, a third-party west side station entrance development, 60 new secure cycle spaces, six electric vehicle charging points, ANPR car park technology, 200 additional car park spaces and air quality monitors. Basically, it is all happening at Kettering station.

Mr Speaker: Indeed, and no one knows how to excite and inspire better than the Minister. We will now hear from North Ayrshire and Arran, apparently in relation to matters Kettering. The mind boggles, but we are about to be enlightened.

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): There is an issue that will, I am sure, have great importance for the people of Kettering, as it will for the people of Scotland. Fifty four per cent of delays and cancellations in Scotland are down to issues with Network Rail, and I am sure that the people of Kettering have a similar story to tell. Given that the respected think-tank Reform Scotland has said that the devolution of Network Rail to Holyrood would be a major step forward in integrating the Scottish transport network, why does the Minister not agree with Reform Scotland?

Andrew Jones: That was a very entrepreneurial link, Mr Speaker. As soon as the Scottish Government start using the powers that they have, they will be more credible when they ask for more.

Rail Connectivity: North-West

15. Damien Moore (Southport) (Con): What steps he has taken to increase rail connectivity between coastal communities and cities in the north-west.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Andrew Jones): Northern is now running an extra 2,000 services per week compared with two years ago and is introducing major improvements for its customers, including 101 brand new trains, which will be operating on the network from this summer. This is part of a major programme of rail investment across the north, which will see room for more than 40,000 passengers at the busiest times and will help transform the rail experience for coastal communities travelling into the cities.

Damien Moore: The hourly service from Southport to Manchester Piccadilly is absolutely vital for residents and businesses in Southport. Will my hon. Friend and the Department for Transport join Network Rail in supporting my bid to restore the hourly service from Southport to Manchester Piccadilly in the December 2019 timetable?

Andrew Jones: My hon. Friend is a great champion of rail services in his area, just as he was of the Access for All bid for Hillside station. I appreciate how vital it is to have regular and reliable train services. I am aware that an additional service was added in the May ’19 timetable, and we are working on an extra service for December. Obviously, I am very happy to keep the pressure up and will keep him posted as we make progress.

Public Transport: Disabled People

16. Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): What steps he is taking to ensure that public transport is accessible to disabled people.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Ms Nusrat Ghani): In July 2018, my Department published the inclusive transport strategy. Our ambition is to create a transport system that provides equal access for disabled people by 2030, and to ensure that disabled people can travel confidently, easily and without extra cost. The Department is making good progress delivering on the many commitments set out in the strategy, and I will be providing a one-year report to Parliament in the summer.

Neil Gray: With responses to the consultation on audiovisual announcements on buses now received, what steps are being taken to see that this happens, and when can we finally expect to see the Government deliver on talking buses?

Ms Ghani: Audiovisual is incredibly important, and they should be delivered by 2020. We want to make sure that our buses are accessible, convenient and as cheap as they can be, and this new bit of technology will enable them to be so.
Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): Buses are not the only form of public transport with accessibility problems. It is still a huge issue for disabled people to get on and off airplanes. I have had constituents tell me that they have been literally manhandled on to flights. Even though airports are accessible, the airlines themselves still have a problem, and often people are left bruised and humiliated. Will the Minister meet me to talk about how we can encourage airlines to do something about that?

Ms Ghan: Absolutely. And that should not be the case. We have put together a really good inclusive transport strategy that sets out how passengers can be treated appropriately in all elements of their travel, and the airports should be doing much better. There is an aviation strategy, and there is also quite a big chunk in the inclusive transport strategy. I am more than happy to sit down with the hon. Lady.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): I was one of the MPs who was happy to support the Guide Dogs talking buses campaign. I even took a trip on a bus blindfold to experience the travel difficulties. It is now two years since the Bus Services Act 2017 was passed, and the Government are still stalling on the roll-out of audiovisual information. All we need is secondary legislation, so can we please have a timetable for when that secondary legislation will be brought forward?

Ms Ghan: We are dealing with the responses to the consultation and I will update the House as soon as I can. The hon. Gentleman can rest assured—I chaired the all-party parliamentary group on sight loss and I am very close to this issue. I want to make sure that buses are accessible to people with all sorts of disabilities.

Bus Services: England

20. Graham Stringer (Blackley and Broughton) (Lab): What plans has he to improve bus services in England. [911338]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Ms Nusrat Ghan): The Bus Services Act 2017 provides the tools that local authorities need, such as enhanced partnerships and franchising, to improve local bus services. We are working with interested local authorities to determine which of the powers provided are best able to support bus networks in their areas. We are also ensuring that pioneering technology, such as the forthcoming bus open data digital service, can overhaul bus services across England and give passengers the information they need to travel with confidence.

Graham Stringer: When Nicholas Ridley deregulated bus services nearly a third of a century ago, he promised that bus services would increase and be used by more passengers. Actually, bus deregulation has been a catastrophe and a disaster for the travelling public. Is not the answer to this question absolutely obvious—that the Government should encourage and allow all local authorities in England to re-regulate their services?

Ms Ghan: Unfortunately, the hon. Gentleman is painting an unrealistic picture. Up and down the country, there are varying numbers of bus passengers. In Bristol, bus passenger numbers are up by 50% and in south Gloucestershire they are up by 36%. We need to put a package of items together to encourage people to use buses. There is the ability to have either franchising or enhanced partnerships that allow local authorities to have a stronger and better relationship with bus companies.

Mr Speaker: On this question, Grahame Morris.

21. [911339] Grahame Morris (Easington) (Lab): Several Members have referred to the health of the bus market. What steps is the Minister taking to address the specific issues of the recruitment and retention of bus drivers, as highlighted in the Transport Committee’s report, and, particularly, of safety, with regard to the Bill being promoted by my hon. Friend the Member for Warwick and Leamington (Matt Western)?

Ms Ghan: Safety is absolutely key. We know that the driver’s relationship with the passengers is what motivates most people to jump on a bus, especially if they have issues to do with disability. I will be responding shortly to the Transport Committee’s report on buses.

Topical Questions

T1. [911341] Paul Blomfield (Sheffield Central) (Lab): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Transport (Chris Grayling): Given the Government’s announcement yesterday about our commitment to pursuing a net zero strategy for carbon emissions, it might be helpful to set out three ways in which my Department is playing its part in taking this forward.

We are now awarding funding for innovative new ideas to transform the railways. I have already mentioned the first operating hydrogen train, but we are putting together a package of additional measures, which are being announced today, to upgrade the technology on the rail system. The Government car service is already taking steps to decarbonise its fleet. I will be encouraging other Government Departments to get their agencies that have fleets to do the same. This summer, we will be publishing our clean maritime plan setting out our role as a global leader in tackling the whole issue of carbon emissions in the maritime sector.

Paul Blomfield: After the May 2018 timetable changes, I raised with Ministers the sacrificing of direct London to Sheffield train services to improve local services for London and the south-east. The latest timetable makes minor changes but no improvements. We still have too few early evening services and longer average journey times than 14 months ago. In the week that northern newspapers launched their Power Up The North campaign, what message does the Secretary of State think that sends, and is he going to do about it?

Chris Grayling: The message it sends is that we have been very clear that while we are going through the process of upgrading the midland main line, there will be some effects on services. However, I am sure that the hon. Gentleman will welcome the improvements that have just been completed at Market Harborough—one
of the big parts of the programme of upgrading the route. Derby station was another part completed fairly recently. This is designed to improve journey times to Sheffield as part of a commitment to transport both to his area and the whole of the north.

T2. [911342] Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): The Mayor and Transport for London have been consulting on major changes to the bus network in London. Will the Secretary of State urge the Mayor to drop his plans to remove the 384 bus route from many roads in New Barnet and the Bevan estate?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Ms Nusrat Ghani): As my right hon. Friend will know, decisions on bus routes are down to the Mayor of London. I think he needs to focus on delivering for Londoners and not just fawning around trying to take selfies. He should be spending more time with Londoners to understand exactly the sort of bus services they need and which journeys they need to take.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): With transport emissions accounting for 29% of all toxic emissions released in the UK, and at a time when Labour has declared that climate change is an existential threat to our nation and planet, will the Secretary of State for Transport tell the House why he has failed to undertake a full environmental audit of road investment strategy 2—the most ecologically and environmentally damaging road building programme for a generation?

Chris Grayling: We have another example of the Labour party’s war on the motorist. The hon. Lady should understand that the more congested our roads are, the higher the emissions. We cannot destroy our economy and get rid of our roads. We have to decarbonise road transport, but we also have to ensure that our roads flow smoothly. Those on the Labour Benches do not get that. They want to scrap road improvements, and they want more traffic jams. Those traffic jams increase emissions. The Labour party just does not get it.

Rachael Maskell: The Secretary of State may think that that answer gets him off the hook, but when road transport accounts for 69% of transport emissions, and air pollution claims 50,000 lives prematurely, he should be less complacent.

UK roads killed or seriously injured 27,000 people, including 2,000 children, last year. It is the most dangerous mode of travel. Why does the Secretary of State not invest in developing a sustainable, integrated public transport strategy, including active travel, as Labour would, instead of this catastrophe of a road building project?

Chris Grayling: We now know the truth: the Labour party is going to be anti-motorist. It is going to be anti-road improvements. It is going to set itself against the things we are doing to try to boost our economy in all parts of the country, through connections to our ports and better motorway links, unlocking the economic potential of places like west Cumbria. Labour does not care. We will continue our work to decarbonise our car fleet and support the development of new technology in buses, for example. We also have the biggest investment programme in the railways since the steam age. Labour has no ideas, and just wants to go to war with the motorist.

T8. [911350] Craig Tracey (North Warwickshire) (Con): I welcome the consultation on a bored tunnel under junction 10 of the M42, which was announced in last week’s HS2 route refinement document, but it includes a new permanent maintenance facility in the village of Austrey. What steps can the Minister take to reduce the impact of that facility on the community, who are already much impacted by HS2?

Ms Ghani: I know that my hon. Friend has been a great champion of his constituency and has been liaising closely with HS2 Ltd. The infrastructure maintenance base that is proposed near Austrey is expected to have a minimal impact on the village when operational, because of its proposed location between the HS2 main line and the village. The site was also chosen because it will involve only limited movements of earth during construction. We expect HS2 Ltd to work to refine the route, to reduce environmental impacts. Where impacts are inevitable, HS2 Ltd will design plans for mitigation. Those plans are still in development and will be reported in the formal environmental statement, which will be deposited alongside the phase 2b hybrid Bill. If my hon. Friend requires a meeting so that I can flesh this out, I am more than happy to do that.

T3. [911343] Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): Step-free access at railway stations is still the responsibility of Network Rail, which, sadly, is not responsible to the Scottish Government. Currently, only 40 of over 350 railway stations in Scotland have step-free access. Is that not another reason why it is so important to see the devolution of Network Rail, so that this unacceptable situation can finally be resolved?

Ms Ghani: There is a £300 million step-free access programme. I do not recognise the hon. Gentleman’s complaint, because 73 further stations were identified in Scotland to get step-free access between 2019 and 2024.¹

Stephen Metcalfe (South Basildon and East Thurrock) (Con): Stanford Coachworks in my constituency is a small, successful engineering business, building minibuses and luxury coaches. However, before its vehicles can be deemed roadworthy, they need to be inspected by the Driver and Vehicle Standards Agency. At present, the availability and frequency of tests falls well below the demand, threatening the viability of the business. Will my right hon. Friend agree to meet me, so that I can explain this in detail and we can see what can be done to improve the situation?

Chris Grayling: We will certainly arrange a meeting for my hon. Friend with a Minister—either me or the roads Minister—to address the issue. I should say that this does appear to be a problem in his area, rather than one that is universal around the country, but we do not want to see any business suffering as a result, and we will certainly work with him to address the problem.

T4. [911345] Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby) (Lab): May I ask how many doctors the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency employs, because they seem to think that they know better than my HGV drivers’ doctors? Too often, this is impacting on the drivers’ livelihoods, and it needs my intervention for the DVLA to take any notice. It should not be like that, should it?

¹[Official Report, 17 June 2019, Vol. 662, c. 1MC.]
Chris Grayling: I understand the point the hon. Lady is making because I have had similar issues in my own constituency. A principle that has been adopted both by her party when it was in government and by us is that, when assessing a person’s medical condition, it is not right or fair to go to their own GP because of the specific relationship that exists between an individual and their GP—whether that be an assessment for welfare entitlements or an assessment for a driving licence. We will always, as a ministerial team, work with Members across the House, if there are examples of individuals who have been hard done by as a result of a decision that is wrong, to see whether we can get the situation at least reviewed.

Julian Sturdy (York Outer) (Con): May I have an update on City of York Council’s bid through the major road network fund for dualling the York northern ring road? Will the new roads Minister meet me to discuss this matter and the levels of congestion that are causing huge concern to my constituents?

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Michael Ellis): I am very happy to meet my hon. Friend, and I look forward to doing so to discuss that matter.

T5. [911346] Anna Soubry (Bromsgrove) (Change UK): I campaigned against a 60-foot viaduct that HS2 Ltd was planning to build through the village of Towell to deliver HS2. I am pleased that it has abandoned that plan, but its alternative, which is a cutting that means 20 more homes will be demolished, does not solve the problem of the real economic and environmental damage that will be caused. The alternative and best way to deliver HS2, including the east midlands hub at Toton sidings, is a tunnel. Will the Secretary of State or a Minister—I do not mind who—meet me to discuss the merits of a tunnel as the best way to deliver all the benefits of HS2 to Broxtowe?

Ms Ghani: I know the right hon. Lady will use every opportunity to campaign, even through petitioning, to ensure that the voices of her constituents are heard. HS2 is committed to ensuring that it mitigates any impact and to working with local communities, but I am of course more than happy to sit down with the right hon. Lady and those from her communities to discuss this.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): I am delighted to see the excellent new Minister in his place. As a Northamptonshire MP, he will know the stretch of the A45 between Stanwick and Thrapston that the Government are committed to dualling. The environmental study to unlock that project was supposed to be carried out during the current roads period, but it has not yet been completed. Will he put his foot on the accelerator to make sure that that work is done to unlock this dualling?

Michael Ellis: I will very much look into this matter. It is interesting to note that Labour Front Benchers would not be supporting this environmental plan. They are the ones who are engaging in a war on the motorist. My hon. Friend is absolutely right to have a look at the A45, because I know that that road has issues. It is about time Labour accepted that this Government’s investment in roads is something it should be duplicating, not resiling from.

T6. [911347] Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): The Minister has previously indicated that the Government will bring forward legislation to improve the safety and regulation of the taxi trade when time allows. Can the Minister tell us when exactly that legislation will be brought before the House, or are we faced with another legislative crash—for want of a better term?

Ms Ghani: I am just as eager as the hon. Gentleman to legislate in this area, considering the amount of work done by the task and finish group. Our commitment is to make sure that standards are raised, security is dealt with and that national enforcement officers ensure that regardless of where people are in the country they are getting into a cab with a driver who has had a standardised background check and has met the threshold for safety and security. I cannot give any more detail right now, but I am pleased that so many Members are as eager as I am to legislate on this issue.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): Earlier this week, the all-party group on bioethanol issued its interim report on the availability of E10. This issue has been dragging on for very many years. May I urge the Minister to come to an early decision, after studying this report?

Chris Grayling: In principle, we intend to go ahead with the introduction of E10. It has to be subject to appropriate consultations. We have been particularly mindful of the impact on older vehicles, which are often owned by those on low incomes. However, it is the right thing to do, particularly given the environmental challenges we face, and we are now going through the process of moving towards its introduction.

T7. [911349] Emma Dent Coad (Kensington) (Lab): What discussions has the Secretary of State had with the right hon. Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson) about his views on the expansion of Heathrow? What steps will the Department take to prepare for a Government U-turn in that area, given that the right hon. Gentleman has committed to lying down in front of bulldozers to stop his own Government’s policy?

Chris Grayling: This House voted overwhelmingly to give Heathrow airport the go-ahead for the next stage of its plans for expansion, and I expect the will of Parliament to be followed in the future.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. If we have brief questions and brief answers, I will attempt to give everybody who is still standing the opportunity to speak.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): In congratulating my Northamptonshire neighbour on his elevation to greatness as the Minister for roads, may I point out that the most important item on his desk is the introduction of civil parking enforcement in Kettering? When will a statutory instrument be introduced to implement that scheme?
Michael Ellis: I am pleased to see Northamptonshire so well represented in the Chamber, as it always is. The Department for Transport has been working with my hon. Friend on that plan regarding legal powers for civil parking enforcement in Kettering. A lot of work has been done, and more still needs to be done by Kettering Borough Council and Northamptonshire County Council, but with my hon. Friend on the case I feel sure that progress will soon be made. We are hoping that those powers will be available early in 2020.

Dan Jarvis (Barnsley Central) (Lab): Chris Boardman in Greater Manchester and Sarah Storey in South Yorkshire are demonstrating the value that active travel commissioners add to the promotion of cycling and walking. Although a series of initiatives helped people to get on their bikes and get out walking, we now need a long-term programme of investment. Does the Minister agree, and, if so, what plans can we expect to be brought forward?

Michael Ellis: As the hon. Gentleman knows, almost £2 billion will have been invested in cycling and walking over the course of the Parliament. Spending on cycling and walking in England has doubled from £3.50 per head to around £7 per head over this spending review period, which is as it should be. Cycling is a highly positive thing for physical fitness, mental health and wellbeing and, of course, the environment. We continue to invest in a way that the previous Government never did.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): The weekend papers contained a striking photograph of £1 billion-worth of Crossrail trains sitting idly in the sidings. Some 479 drivers are not being used, which I understand costs £25 million a year, and £17 billion has been spent on Crossrail stations that currently have no trains going through them. Meanwhile, why does it take months and months to get any action from TransPennine Express in Hull to replace signs that are covered with gaffer tape? Why do we still have Pacers trains, and why was the electrification cancelled?

Chris Grayling: The hon. Gentleman is arguing for the abolition of Transport for Greater Manchester, Nexus, and all the rest. Transport for London oversees the buses, and runs metro rail systems and its local Overground rail system. Those powers already exist in the cities of the north, and the hon. Gentleman appears to argue that those cities should lose those powers, which should be moved to Transport for the North. I do not think that is the right thing to do.

Douglas Chapman (Dunfermline and West Fife) (SNP): I do not know whether anyone on the Government Front Bench managed to get to the electric scooter demonstration yesterday that was provided by Bird, but such initiatives can encourage a modal shift and get people out of their cars. Will the Minister consider legislation to open up the use of electric scooters on our roads, and help us to achieve our climate change targets?

Chris Grayling: We will always look carefully at new technologies, but any new technologies introduced on and around our roads need to be safe. We need to be confident that they will continue to be safe for not only those who use them, but those around them.

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): I refer to the Secretary of State’s response to the question from my hon. Friend the Member for Kensington (Emma Dent Coad) on runway three. I will try again. Given that the Government have now followed the Opposition in committing to net zero carbon emissions by 2050, surely the Secretary of State must see that Parliament might now vote a different way on a project that emits 6 million tonnes of carbon emissions per annum and provides zero net benefit to the UK economy?

Chris Grayling: I am afraid I simply do not accept that the latter point is true. This Parliament voted, by a majority of nearly 300, to give the go-ahead to a project that I personally believe is of key strategic importance to the United Kingdom over the coming decades. I think that says it all.

Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): Whether it is electric scooters or dockless bike schemes, technology moves so much more quickly than the Department for Transport. After years and years, will the Secretary of State finally do something about dockless bike schemes, and help our local authorities respond to the changes?

Michael Ellis: This Department leads the way internationally on transport issues and is a world leader in considering our carbon emissions, cycling, walking and active travel. The Department is a world leader in these fields.
Sudan

10.41 am

Sir Henry Bellingham (North West Norfolk) (Con): (Urgent Question) To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the crisis in Sudan and ongoing human rights abuses.

The Minister for Africa (Harriett Baldwin): The people of Sudan have shown incredible bravery and perseverance in their demands for an end to a brutal and unaccountable regime. We stand with them. The Transitional Military Council must listen to the Sudanese people and respect their legitimate demand for civilian rule.

Since the removal of Bashir on 11 April, the UK has made clear statements alongside our troika partners, the United States and Norway, as well as via the Foreign Secretary, calling for all sides to engage in an inclusive dialogue that leads to a swift and peaceful transition to civilian rule. The UK will continue to engage closely with the full spectrum of Sudanese actors, including civil society, in both Khartoum and London, to support a better future for Sudan.

We continue our call for Sudanese authorities to refrain from all violence, and for constructive dialogue that delivers a credible response to protest demands to resume. We welcome the work of the African Union in mediating, and the early progress reported towards the resumption of talks with the Forces of Freedom and Change. Following the sickening and brutal acts committed by Sudanese security forces on 3 June, I summoned the Sudanese ambassador to the Foreign Office last week, and told him in the strongest terms that these violent acts against civilians must stop.

Sir Henry Bellingham: I am very grateful to the Minister for her response. When Omar al-Bashir stood down and the Transitional Military Council took over—the Minister alluded to that—there was a huge amount of optimism. There were peaceful protests and there was space for opposition groups. Since last weekend, however, the situation has become horrendous. We have seen the Rapid Support Forces—the former Janjaweed militia—play a part in killing over 100 people. A number of women have been arrested, as have various opposition politicians, including Mohamed Esmat, and three key people from the SPLM-N—the Sudan People's Liberation Movement-North.

The Minister mentioned the help she is giving to Sudanese diaspora groups here. What conversations are we having with them, and what additional assistance can we give the alliance? Will she provide more details on that? Its leaders are being arrested, and many key personnel who are abroad want to come back and need help. What efforts are the troika and Her Majesty's Government making to put pressure on countries such as Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Egypt, which are apparently giving support to the Transitional Military Council?

Finally, the Minister rightly mentioned the African Union, which has a key role to play. Does she think it sensible for the AU to have suspended Sudan's membership at a time when there should be dialogue, discussion and pressure applied, and what will she and the Secretary of State do to work with the AU, which is absolutely the key player in this, to make sure that common sense prevails, that space is given for democracy and that the will of the people triumphs in a country that has so much potential, but which is suffering so much at the moment?

Harriett Baldwin: I start by putting on the record my gratitude to my hon. Friend for his tireless advocacy on behalf of the people of Sudan, for his involvement in the all-party group on Sudan and South Sudan, and for the way he posed his question. He is absolutely right that we should also pay tribute to the tireless work of Her Majesty's Ambassador Irfan Siddiq and his team in the embassy in Khartoum. They have been working relentlessly in very difficult conditions to put forward the view of Her Majesty's Government, which is that we need to find a way of taking the inspiring activism that led to the removal of former President Bashir a few months ago, and moving forward in line with the aspirations of the Sudanese people towards civilian-led government.

My hon. Friend rightly pointed out the importance of a range of external actors and of our work with US and Norway in the troika. We are one of a group of countries that consider themselves friends of Sudan and want to play a constructive role in moving forward in this transition, which even the Forces of Freedom and Change recognise will have to be a protracted one, given that the country is coming out of a long period of direct rule by Bashir, and that the institutions and structures that we take for granted in our country take time to form in the transition to democracy. It is important therefore that there be an overall agreement, and that the sovereign council, which includes both the Transitional Military Council and civilians, be able to take things forward.

The US, Norway and the UK will work together constructively. We welcome the stance that the African Union has taken, and we fully support its envoy and the work that Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed from Ethiopia has done to find a way forward. My hon. Friend also rightly points out the importance of engaging with our friends in Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates to ensure a smooth transition to civilian rule. The international community has been clear about the completely unacceptable behaviour of the Rapid Support Forces; we deplore the terrible atrocities committed. We will set out the potential rewards of moving to civilian rule and make sure that people understand the tools we have to sanction those who do not play a constructive role in that transition.

Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): The constant protest in Sudan since last December resulted in President Bashir being removed from power by the military on 11 April and the council of generals assuming power. The Transitional Military Council has since been in negotiations with protesters about establishing a civilian-led Government. On 15 May, it agreed to a three-year transition period to civilian rule, but that changed on 3 June, when, fearing they had ceded too much power to the protesters, Sudanese paramilitary forces launched a violent crackdown. Since then, much of the country has been shut down by a three-day strike.

The African Union has rightly suspended Sudan from its membership until a civilian-led transitional authority has been established, but we need further pressure placed on the Transitional Military Council to...
continue the political transition. To that end, the Government should encourage our allies in Riyadh and Abu Dhabi to persuade Sudanese paramilitary forces to pull out of Khartoum and resume negotiations with protesters.

In December 2017, the former Foreign Secretary thought it wise to hold a trade forum with Sudan. We warned the Government at the time about striking trade deals with Sudan while ignoring the country’s human rights abuses, but they did not listen. The Government really need to get their priorities in order. Instead of constantly searching for new trade deals, we need to be prioritising human rights. I therefore ask the Minister to ensure that her Government call for an outside-led investigation into the killing of protesters, halt all deportations and removals to Sudan, support real regime change and ultimately use their diplomatic clout to ensure a peaceful transition to civilian rule in Sudan.

Harriett Baldwin: I assure the hon. Lady that we are using every diplomatic avenue that we can to seek to ensure that the uprising leads to a smooth transition to civilian rule. We are certainly not holding back on condemning the behaviour that we have seen from the Rapid Support Forces.

The hon. Lady mentions the important role that we can play in other forums. I can confirm that on Monday I will be in Luxembourg with other European Union Foreign Ministers to talk about the situation in Sudan, and to see what we can do on the strategy that I outlined, which is to show the clear upside for the economy of a smooth transition to civilian rule. I am sure that she would recognise that part of the clear upside has to be economic reform and the ability to start doing more business with Sudanese businesses, and that that is an important part of the transition.

In addition, we welcome the fact that the US has appointed a special envoy. We have our special envoy, Bob Fairweather, and the US has just announced that its special envoy is Ambassador Donald Booth, who is in Sudan today with American Assistant Secretary Tibor Nagy. Again, this is about reiterating our points about the importance of the smooth transition to civilian rule, and how that can unlock economic reforms and Sudan’s economic potential.

The hon. Lady rightly welcomes the constructive role being played by the African Union, which has sent very clear messages. She rightly says that these kinds of human rights violations and abuses absolutely need to be clearly documented. We have heard very disturbing reports, not only in Khartoum, but in Darfur. They are as yet unconfirmed, but through our diplomatic channels at the United Nations, we have again urged the UNAMID—United Nations-African Union Mission in Darfur—peacekeeping mission to fully investigate them. She is absolutely right to say that these kinds of atrocities are not things that the world will forget, and that it will look to hold accountable those who have committed them.

James Duddridge (Rochford and Southend East) (Con): I welcome the appointment of the US special envoy; that role has been left unfilled for too long. In September I was in Sudan, and I noticed a certain contempt—which continues—from the ruling elite towards more distant organisations, whether that was the US, Norway, the UK, the UN or, to a lesser degree, the AU. However, I did notice that the ruling elite took note of what was said by their near neighbours in particular. What leverage do we have, particularly through our foreign aid relationships with those near neighbours, that we can use to put pressure on for a peaceful solution? As part of our international aid programme, we are providing some £85 million of support to enable people to feed their families. As always with our humanitarian assistance, it needs to be predicated on need, rather than tied to any specific political act.

Separately, on the political track, we need to keep making clear statements about the potential upside for the Sudanese economy of following a path for reform—the upside that could exist if Sudan were to move out of being classified by the United States as effectively a state sponsor of terrorism. So there is a clear path that can be followed to a much better future for the Sudanese people. We encourage all actors, neighbours and the international community to work with the Sudanese people to achieve that.

Chris Law (Dundee West) (SNP): In the past 10 days, at least 124 people have been killed by the regime forces and more than 700 have been injured, as protests have steadily engulfed Khartoum. We have also had widespread reports of sexual violence, mass arrests, gunfire in medical facilities and bodies floating in the River Nile.

The SNP follows the EU in calling on the Sudanese Government to release all journalists, members of the Opposition, human rights defenders and other protesters arbitrarily detained, and to conduct a thorough investigation into recent deaths and human rights abuses. I welcome the Minister’s statement and I note that she is going to Luxembourg on Monday to meet EU partners. Does she agree that a multilateral approach through such institutions as the EU is the most effective way to exert international pressure and to ensure that human rights are respected? If so, what conversations has she had with her European counterparts about the most effective means to do so?

Does the Minister agree that we are watching Sudanese society teeter on the brink of large-scale violence and potential civil war? What lessons has she learned in her Department from Myanmar that will help to avoid a similar situation?

Harriett Baldwin: The hon. Gentleman will have heard about the way in which we are engaging with our EU counterparts on this. We talked about near neighbours, but of course Sudan is very close to all of us, so it is important that we find a way to facilitate the smooth transition to civilian government.

The hon. Gentleman is right to talk about the terrible atrocities on 3 June that led to my summoning the Sudanese ambassador. This morning’s reports from our post on the ground state that there has been a continued reduction in the Rapid Support Forces present on the streets of Khartoum; that talks are continuing to take place, facilitated by mediators; and that African Union envoy Labat and Ethiopian envoy Dirir are playing a constructive role in moving those forward. So I think that we can welcome the international engagement, but we can also welcome the fact that, through this mediation
by the African Union, there has been a de-escalation of the totally unacceptable behaviour of 3 June by the Rapid Support Forces.

Mr Andrew Mitchell (Sutton Coldfield) (Con): Thank you for granting this important urgent question this morning, Madam Deputy Speaker.

Britain, as the Minister so rightly says, has a pivotal role to play as a member of the Troika, along with Norway and the United States, as it has for many years. And this House too—Jo Cox, our late colleague, and I worked on the atrocities in Darfur for many years, both when I was in opposition and when I was Secretary of State.

The critical point that Britain can make at this time is that there will be no impunity for the human rights abusers in the regime in Sudan who are conducting the most appalling events in Sudan—in Khartoum and elsewhere—in respect of civil society, which is trying to move Sudan to a better place. I refer not just to the appalling events that have taken place through militias such as the Janjaweed in Darfur; President General Bush referred to events there as a genocide and General Bashir must be held to account by the International Criminal Court. There is also the fact that the human rights abusers in the forces in Khartoum can be held to account today through mobile phone technology. There are many pictures of individuals who have been abusing the human rights of citizens in Khartoum and Britain should make the point that they will all be held to account in due course, no matter how long it takes.

Harriett Baldwin: I pay tribute to my right hon. Friend for his work at the time of the last Darfur crisis, and, of course, to our late lamented colleague Jo Cox, who made such an impact on the world’s attention to this situation.

My right hon. Friend is absolutely right: we must not lose track of accountability, particularly that of state security forces when there are documented human rights violations. As I said, we are hearing that there are a number of unconfirmed reports and that there is also evidence on mobile phones. We think that that is one of the reasons the internet has been shut down, and has continued to be shut down. As he will appreciate, that makes it difficult to confirm what has happened. That is why we have taken steps to go via the United Nations peacekeeping mission and called on that mission to get to the bottom of what has happened and of who has been responsible, so that they can be held accountable for these atrocities.

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): The announcement by special envoy Mahmoud Dirir that talks may resume today shows the importance of what has happened and of who has been responsible, so that they can be held accountable for these atrocities.

Mr Andrew Mitchell: If this is the case, and if there is support from both the African Union—which plays a very important role—and the United Nations, I think the whole House would support it as well, because we need the evidence to hold people to account. The tragedy in Sudan and Darfur is that far too many people have got away with far too much.

Harriett Baldwin: Let me clarify what I said. We believe that in Darfur, where the reports have been hard to confirm, UNAMID can have an important role in trying to get to the bottom of what has happened and ensuring that justice is served. In Khartoum itself there is also work to be done in terms of documentation, but my understanding is that no forces from UNAMID have been deployed there. Part of the evidentiary process relating to these atrocities will require us to try to get to the bottom of some of the documentation on people’s mobile phones. However, it is on the agenda of all the players, including international players, to find the best way of ensuring that we do not lose sight of the fact that these abuses must be met with justice, whether they are violations by the security forces or abuses by others.

Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): Along with other Members who are present today, I visited Sudan last year. It was my fourth visit. The plea of the ordinary Sudanese is “Please do not forget us and please hear our cries when we really do need help.” They need help at the moment.

Our ambassador has been called in for a dressing down. Can the Minister assure me that our staff in Sudan are given maximum protection, because that is a worrying development?

I ask for two things. I share what my hon. Friend the Member for Heywood and Middleton (Liz McInnes) said. May we have an absolute assurance that the Minister will talk to the Home Office to make sure there are no deportations back to Sudan at the moment? That is the one thing the large diaspora here will want to hear.

The most worrying thing we found out from our visit last year was the rapid rundown of UNAMID. Can we stop that? Can we make sure we invest in UNAMID and get people back on the ground? That is the only way we will stop a dangerous escalation of all sorts of conflict in Darfur.

Harriett Baldwin: First, I appreciate the hon. Gentleman’s strong interest in this area. I answer a lot of the written parliamentary questions that he tables. I want to put on record for the people of Sudan that of course Her Majesty’s Government will not lose sight of the issues and what is happening and they will remain at the forefront of our minds. The hon. Gentleman is right to point to the bravery of our ambassador and the team. This is the second time that we have drawn down our embassy staff to the minimum. I assure colleagues that of course we make sure that they are protected in the way that they need to be, but we have asked non-essential staff and families to leave and we have updated our travel advice for any British citizens thinking of travelling to Khartoum or Sudan more widely.

In terms of Darfur and UNAMID, I can say to the House that the decision last year to draw down troops has been implemented. That has been a fairly modest drawdown. There will be no further drawdown. Under the
current circumstances it is important that that presence remain in place and we remain committed to being a partner supporting that deployment at this time.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. The Minister has been giving very thorough answers to the questions. That is my polite way of saying it would be helpful if she could perhaps be a little briefer as we proceed.

Conor McGinn (St Helens North) (Lab): May I press the Minister on what she said in relation to UNAMID? There is significant evidence of continuing human rights abuses in Darfur. There is emerging evidence that the RSF has occupied bases that the African Union and the UN have left. There is a vote at the end of this month at the AU and the UN about a further significant diminishing of the UNAMID operation. Will the UK absolutely oppose any further withdrawal or drawdown because it is the last remaining safeguard for the civilian population there and if it is drawn down further we will hand complete control to the human rights abusers?

Harriett Baldwin: In the interests of brevity, Madam Deputy Speaker, I confirm that the UK position is that there should be no further drawdown.

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): Sudan finds itself sixth in the Open Doors world watch list for persecution of Christians and we know that the 2 million Christians there are subjected to extreme persecution, in particular in the Nuba mountains where thousands of Christians have been slaughtered and displaced, so this is a serious issue. Will the Minister consider the calls from Christian Solidarity Worldwide to convene a special session of the UN Human Rights Council on that issue?

Harriett Baldwin: The hon. Gentleman will be aware of the Foreign Secretary’s prioritisation of freedom of religion and belief in his work and my colleague from the other place, Lord Tariq Ahmad, was in Khartoum last year making precisely this point.

The hon. Gentleman makes a very sensible point about the Human Rights Council. He will be aware that we tried to raise this at the Security Council last week but it was blocked by Russia and China. However, we will of course explore all international avenues to make sure that we keep this issue on the agenda.

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): Cardiff has a strong and long-standing Sudanese community and many concerns have been raised with me by constituents who are also deeply worried about friends and relatives whom they are unable to contact because of the cutting off of the internet and communications. As the two former International Development Secretaries who served in the Government, and the Minister, will be aware, the voluntary sector are very concerned and call on the Government to support the UN Armed Mission in Darfur. The UN has had reports that 19 children have been killed and that 49 or so are believed to have been injured, some of whom have been sexually assaulted. Will the Minister assure us that the Government will do all they can to press for protection for the most vulnerable, including children, during the horrific violence that they are seeing in their country?

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): The last I heard, the brave men and women working in international aid agencies such as the International Rescue Committee were still operating on the ground. Are we in contact with those organisations, and what are they reporting back? It is encouraging to hear that European Ministers are meeting to talk, so would not a new delegation be timely if that could be arranged at this time?

Harriett Baldwin: I agree with the hon. Gentleman. A few days ago, I met some of the leading non-governmental organisations that are delivering humanitarian assistance, and access is continuing to allow them to do that. Obviously one has to put on record one’s admiration for the bravery of the people involved. As far as a delegation is concerned, I understand that commercial flights from both Ethiopian Airlines and Turkish Airlines have now restarted. We hope that the situation will remain peaceful enough on the ground to enable us to update our travel advice, but at the moment the travel advice for British citizens is for essential travel only.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): And the prize for patience and perseverance, as ever, goes to Jim Shannon.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. It is always a pleasure to speak in this House, whatever time it may be—either first or last, it doesn’t matter.
Could the Minister outline the practical steps that she has been taking, as well as the statements that have been issued, to help to provide safety and security for those who are peacefully protesting? What discussions has her office had recently to attempt to lever diplomatic pressure—to prevent the killings, the abuse of protesters and the horrific sexual abuse of some women—on a Government who are downright refusing to meet the basic human rights of their people?

Harriett Baldwin: I would like to pay tribute to the hon. Gentleman but, in the interest of brevity, I must tell him that many of those points were covered in my earlier answers. Our travel advice for British citizens is kept constantly updated, and at the moment our travel advice is for essential travel only.

Local Housing Allowance: Supreme Court Ruling

11.14 am

Marsha De Cordova (Battersea) (Lab) (Urgent Question): To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions to make a statement on yesterday’s Supreme Court ruling in the case of Samuels v. Birmingham City Council and the impact it will have on the Department’s setting of local housing allowance rates.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Will Quince): The ruling was not against the Department; it was a case against Birmingham City Council. I will look at the judgment carefully. The Court decided that the local authority had used the wrong test when deciding whether accommodation is affordable. The assessment is needed when deciding whether someone has made themselves intentionally homeless.

The decision is primarily one for local authorities to consider with regard to how they deal with applications for unintentional homelessness. However, I will undertake to consider the implications fully with my Department. LHA rates are not intended to meet full rental costs in all areas. The intention behind the welfare reform programme is that the same considerations and choices faced by people not in receipt of benefits should also face those claiming benefits. The LHA policy is designed to make the system fairer for all to achieve that.

The Government recognise, however, that the impact of freezing LHA rates may have different effects across the country, with rents in some areas increasing at different rates. In view of that, a proportion of the savings from the freeze to LHA rates is used to create targeted affordability funding. That funding is being used to increase those LHA rates that have diverged the most from local rents.

Marsha De Cordova: I am grateful to Mr Speaker for granting the urgent question.

Yesterday, the Supreme Court ruled on the case of Samuels v. Birmingham City Council, a case in which a single mother with four children was found “intentionally homeless” for not using her subsistence social security to pay the shortfall between her local housing allowance and her rent. Since 2016, the Government have frozen LHA, while private rents have continued to rise. That has meant that housing benefits no longer cover the cost of renting in the private sector.

Research by Shelter has found that for a two-bedroom home, even for the cheapest third of rents, LHA rates do not cover rental costs in 97% of areas in England. In the case that the Supreme Court ruled on yesterday, Ms Samuels was expected to use her social security to find an additional £150 a month to top up her local housing allowance to cover her rent. That put Ms Samuels in an impossible situation, essentially forcing her to choose between housing her family and feeding them. That is happening in the context of local authorities being forced to spend £1 billion a year on emergency and temporary accommodation, with the costs of preventing homelessness being pushed from national to local government.

The Government cannot continue to expect the poorest people in our society to find a way of paying for what the Government refuse to. The judgment sets a precedent.
Will the Minister make a clear statement on the Supreme Court’s judgment and tell the House how the Government intend to respond? When will the Secretary of State reset LHA rates in response to the judgment? Finally, will the Minister tell us what assessment the Government have made of the hardship caused by the freeze in LHA rates?

**Will Quince:** The hon. Lady is right that LHA rates were frozen in the summer Budget in 2015 and have therefore been frozen since 2016. That was about getting our welfare bill under control. It was about ensuring that we provided the support necessary for those who needed it and fairness for those who pay for it, and making sure that our welfare system is sustainable in the long term. I can tell the hon. Lady that the freeze will end in March 2020. In all cases, the targeted affordability fund is available. We also have discretionary housing payments, and £1 billion has been made available since 2011.

Ultimately, it is a supply issue. LHA rates are one thing and supply is another. We need to look at successive Governments that have not built enough affordable—by which I mean council and social—housing. Nevertheless, the hon. Lady will be aware that I did a lot of work in this area before taking up my ministerial post. She would therefore expect me to undertake further work in post, and there will be more to come.

**Alex Chalk** (Cheltenham) (Con): Rents in Cheltenham are relatively high. Does the Minister agree that bringing more housing on stream is critical to bringing down those rents? Does he join me in welcoming the £3 million that went to Cheltenham via the housing infrastructure fund to make what would otherwise be unviable developments viable, bringing vital housing on stream?

**Will Quince:** My hon. Friend is right that we are taking action to build the homes that our country needs. The LHA rate is an issue in so many cases because of supply and demand. Demand massively outstrips supply in certain areas, so I am pleased by the action that Cheltenham is taking with his support.

**Neil Gray** (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): I pay tribute to Ms Samuels, who brought her case as far as the Supreme Court. Hopefully her struggle will result in change so that others do not have to go through this.

This case should be a wake-up call for many local authorities in how they process homelessness applications, while acknowledging that Scotland has much stronger homelessness legislation. Local authorities have been left in a very difficult situation because of this Government’s policies, which drive cases like that of Ms Samuels. Local housing allowance rates have been frozen at 2015 levels by this Government. Why will that freeze continue into next year? The Minister simply cannot say that this is about not wanting to subsidise the private rented sector, because the Government are actively doing that by not building social housing.

In the four years to 2018, Scotland delivered 50% more affordable housing units per head of population and—this is the important one—five times more social rented properties per head of population, and more in total, than England. The Scottish Government are also spending £12 million on discretionary housing payments to mitigate the Government’s freeze on benefits such as local housing allowance and £50 million to mitigate the bedroom tax.

A perfect storm has led to so many of us having cases like that of Ms Samuels at our surgeries—punitive, arbitrary and punishing cuts to social security, including housing benefit, coupled with rent increases and a devastating under-supply of social housing. When will the Government wake up to the crisis they are causing?

**Will Quince:** Despite the freeze in Scotland, we have seen LHA rates rise. One rate rose in 2017-18, three rates rose in 2018-19 and 16 rates rose in 2019-20. The hon. Gentleman knows me well enough to know that I am looking at various options in this area ahead of potential spending review bids. The freeze comes to an end next year, and I look forward to working with him.

**James Duddridge** (Rochford and Southend East) (Con): It is a great pleasure to see the Minister in his place, which will give great reassurance to my right hon. Friend the Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson) that it is possible to leave the Government and rejoin at a more senior level in short order.

My hon. Friend the Member for Cheltenham (Alex Chalk) hit the nail on the head. It is all about the supply of private sector housing. What discussions has the Minister had with the Minister for Housing on increasing the supply of housing and, in particular, building above shops? Whether in Birmingham, Colchester, Cheltenham or Southend, this has to be part of the solution.

**Will Quince:** I thank my hon. Friend for his kind words and his question. He is right that supply is a key element. Raising LHA rates would be one thing, but it will not have the impact we need if we do not build the housing that is desperately needed.

I am working closely with my counterpart at the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, and we are looking at supply ahead of potential spending review bids. We will be holding regular meetings to discuss these matters further.

**Lilian Greenwood** (Nottingham South) (Lab): The local housing allowance freeze is causing real hardship not just in Birmingham but across the country, and I will be raising the impact on Nottingham citizens in my Adjournment debate next Monday. Does the Minister not understand that the Government’s commitment to eradicating homelessness will continue to ring very hollow while his Department continues to pursue many of the very policies that created the problem in the first place?

**Will Quince:** I look forward to the Adjournment debate on Monday evening, when we will discuss these matters in more detail. We want everyone to have security in their home and a roof over their head, which is why we have committed over £1.2 billion to tackle homelessness and rough sleeping. We have published a strategy to end rough sleeping by 2027 and to halve it by 2022, backed by £100 million of initial funding, and we have changed the law so that councils can place families in private rented accommodation so that they get a suitable place sooner. Statutory homelessness acceptances fell last year.
Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): The Minister says that the Government’s aim is to get support to the people who need it and to make the system sustainable, but surely what this case underlines is that we have a welfare system that is broken and that the Government’s attempts to fix it are failing. We need the welfare system repaired and we need action to tackle cases like this, along with the record numbers using food banks and a welfare system that is not doing what the Minister states is its aim.

Will Quince: I am afraid that I do not recognise the picture that the hon. Lady paints. We are spending record amounts on our welfare system—over £95 billion a year for those of working age.

Richard Burden (Birmingham, Northfield) (Lab): Does the Minister agree that this Supreme Court judgment not only highlights the huge gap between local housing allowance rates and the reality of rents in the private sector, but shines a light on the much bigger crisis of homelessness, which today is a massive part of my caseload and, I think, that of other hon. Members? It is a crisis that in Birmingham, the month after the case went to the Supreme Court, saw 12,000 households on the council waiting list including the homeless and 2,500 households in temporary accommodation. Does he accept that this will not be tackled until the Government recognise the need to invest in social housing on the scale required and adopt social security policies that tackle poverty rather than exacerbate it and compound the homelessness problem, and that unfreezing the LHA cap would be a first step in that?

Finally, does he recognise that the message here for Birmingham City Council and other local authorities is that they must always keep focused on the people, not simply on the procedures?

Will Quince: The hon. Gentleman should not underestimate my determination—I chaired the all-party group on ending homelessness—to absolutely deliver on our commitments to halve and then end rough sleeping. I recognise what he says about LHA rates, but that is not the case across the country. Rates are an issue in some parts of the country but not in others, which is why I am looking at this very carefully. I have been working with my counterparts in the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, as he suggests, because supply is also an issue.

Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): The local housing allowance causes us real problems in Stroud, because we are in the same area as Gloucester, where rents are much lower. That is nothing to do with this Minister, let alone this Government or previous, successive Governments; it was a Labour Government who grouped those areas together. Will he at least take a look at the impact on those groupings where rents are higher in some areas and lower in others?

Will Quince: The hon. Gentleman raises a good point. Those groupings are based on broad rental market areas, and in some parts of the country they pose an issue. A number of Members from across the House have raised this issue with me and I am looking at it.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): Under this Government we have seen the introduction of the bedroom tax and universal credit, both of which are causing rent arrears, and the Minister has actually admitted that UC delays are leading to an increase in prostitution. He says that the reason for the freeze in LHA rates, which is now making people homeless, is to stop the private rented sector being subsidised, yet another Government policy is leading to increased numbers of properties in the private rented sector. The right to buy has resulted in 75,618 sales and over 21,890 new starts since 2012, leading to a further imbalance between public and private sector housing. When will this Government get a joined-up, just social policy?

Will Quince: First, I want to correct the record. I did not make those comments at the Work and Pensions Committee yesterday, and if the hon. Gentleman checks the record he will see that that is the case. Since the freeze, LHA rates have been adjusted through targeted affordability funding, as I mentioned earlier. In addition, over £1 billion has been made available since 2011 in discretionary housing payments. I have made it clear that the freeze ends in March 2020 and, ahead of a spending review bid, I am looking at numerous options.
Business of the House

11.29 am

Valerie Vaz (Walsall South) (Lab): Will the Leader of the House give us the business for next week?

The Leader of the House of Commons (Mel Stride):

The business for the week commencing 17 June will include:

Monday 17 June—Second reading of the Non-Domestic Rating (Lists) Bill.

Tuesday 18 June—Motion to approve an ecclesiastical Measure relating to church representation and ministers, followed by a motion to approve a statutory instrument relating to the draft Safeguarding Vulnerable Groups Act 2006 (Specified Scottish Authority and Barred Lists) Order 2019, followed by debate on a motion relating to progress of implementation of the recommendations of the Cox report. The subject of this debate was determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

Wednesday 19 June—Remaining stages of the Parliamentary Buildings (Restoration and Renewal) Bill.

Thursday 20 June—Debate on a motion on refugee family reunion, followed by a general debate on court closures and access to justice. The subjects of these debates were determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

Friday 21 June—The House will not be sitting.

Tomorrow marks two years since the devastating Grenfell Tower fire. The survivors and bereaved have endured so much with such dignity, and I know that the thoughts of the entire House will be with them at this time.

Valerie Vaz: I thank the Leader of the House for the forthcoming business. My copy of the statement is on two pages; I wonder whether the second page is intentionally blank—we seem to have only one week’s business.

I thank everyone, including the Clerks, involved in the new edition—the 25th—of “Erskine May”, which is also available online, so lots of people will be able to look it up and hold the Government to account for what they do in the Chamber.

It looks as though the Backbench Business Committee has taken control of the business next week. Will the Leader of the House consider giving us an Opposition day? It seems that the Government have gone into the cupboard—it is a bit like “Old Mother Hubbard went to the cupboard”. I keep thinking of nursery rhymes, what with the 10 green bottles standing on a wall in the leadership election—

Ian Mearns (Gateshead) (Lab): Blue bottles.

Valerie Vaz: Yes, blue bottles. The Government have gone to the cupboard, and lurking in there is the Non-Domestic Rating (Lists) Bill, which was published only yesterday but has its Second Reading on Monday.

I know that last week was the Leader of the House’s first week, but he said that he would come forward with the recess dates “in due course.” Parliament and the country have no idea what is going to happen after July and in September and October. The Leader of the House must have had some discussions; will he provide a bit more clarity on when he will announce the dates for the summer and conference recesses? This issue cannot be part of the campaign promises. The Leader of the House is Parliament’s voice in Government. Parliament is not irrelevant, particularly at this time, when we have a minority Government.

One of the many governmental powers that can be exercised without statutory authority, by convention, is the Dissolution of Parliament, or Prorogation if it is the end of the Session. The sovereign acts on the advice of her Ministers. We know that the breaching of conventions is not illegal, and we are talking about a convention, but the courts can look at it. It is outrageous, morally and constitutionally, for candidates in the Tory leadership election to suggest that they will put our gracious sovereign in a position to prorogue Parliament. Will the Leader of the House rule that out today?

At least three candidates have said that the UK will leave the EU without a deal, even though Parliament has expressly voted against it. Will the Leader of the House rule that out today? He must have seen the Cabinet note warning that the country is still unprepared for leaving on 31 October. It said that we need four to five months—that is at least until November—for trader readiness, and six to eight months to ensure that adequate arrangements are in place to build stockpiles of medicines. Should we not have a debate on whether the country is actually ready for leaving on 31 October?

The candidates are saying that they will renegotiate the withdrawal agreement. Are negotiations still ongoing? Is anyone talking to the EU? May we have a statement on the current discussions with the EU? Instead, we are getting a string of policy announcements, none of which is costed, none of which has been put to the electorate, and none of which has been agreed by the Chancellor. Handouts to the highest earners, according to the Resolution Foundation, would see 83% of gains going to the richest 10% of households, with the biggest beneficiaries, as a proportion of their income, being those on £80,000. The shadow Chancellor has said that the money involved is more than we spend every year on justice or children’s social care. I am pleased that the Leader of the House mentioned Grenfell, but not a single one of the candidates has said what they will do to prevent another Grenfell.

The Prime Minister said yesterday that employment figures have risen in the west midlands. I ask the Leader of the House to kindly ask the Prime Minister to correct that, because business leaders in Greater Birmingham have warned this week that stagnating employment statistics in the west midlands present a concerning picture. Unemployment fell by 0.1% between February and April, but the figures remain significantly above the national average, second only to the north-west. Why is employment stagnating in Tory Britain? May we have a debate on employment in the west midlands?

This week, the National Farmers Union organised an event at which farmers in the west midlands spoke of the terrible uncertainty of a no-deal exit and of how they need to use places such as the Netherlands to grow spinach, particularly in October when our growing season is coming to an end. May we have debate on the effect of no deal on the food and farming industry?

In Carers Week, in Tory Britain, there are around 7 million carers in the UK, 58% of whom are women. Hon. Members will have seen the display of the Multiple Sclerosis Society in the Upper Waiting Hall.
three people with MS are not getting the care that they need. When will the Government publish the social care Green Paper?

The Leader of the House will have heard the words of the outgoing ambassador in Singapore, who said that people outside the UK have described the UK as beset by division, obsessed with ideology, and careless of the truth. All the major investment is going to Germany and France, but, worryingly, this is what we are hearing: £350 million to the NHS, free television licences for the over-75s, trade deals are easy, no deal is better than a bad deal, and strong and stable. You cannot run a country on rhetoric. The Government may have won the vote yesterday, but we will try again for the good of the country and for our reputation in the world.

May I ask the Leader of the House to kindly join me in wishing the Opposition Chief Whip a very happy birthday, as he has worked selflessly all his life for the good of the party and for the good of the country as a Minister and in Opposition? We wish him a very happy birthday.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): We all wish the Opposition Chief Whip a very happy birthday.

Mel Stride: There is only one person in this House whose birthday is more important than that of the shadow Chief Whip and that is the Chief Whip. I do not know when it is, but whenever it is I wish him a very happy birthday, too. I do not know what the shadow Chief Whip treats himself to on his birthday. Perhaps he polishes the instruments of torture in the Labour Whips’ Office. [Interruption.] He is a softly indeed, as the shadow Leader of the House says, and I wholeheartedly concur with her best wishes to the shadow Chief Whip.

The hon. Lady raised a large number of points, which I will attempt to deal with in turn. She made reference to the blank page that she has received in the forthcoming business. That is indicative of the large amount of business that we will be bringing forward in due course to fill that page and many others. She quite accurately raised the issue of the preponderance of Back-Bench business debates that we are putting forward at the business that we will be bringing forward in due course. That is indicative of the large amount of business that we will be bringing forward in due course to fill that page and many others. She quite accurately raised the issue of the preponderance of Back-Bench business debates that we are putting forward at the business that we will be bringing forward in due course. That is indicative of the large amount of business that we will be bringing forward in due course to fill that page and many others. 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wish the Labour Chief Whip a happy birthday. All he wants is for his Back Benchers to observe a three-line Whip for once.

May we have a debate about sustainable populations? Today, the cull begins in this grotesque Tory horror show as the candidates are cut down to more manageable numbers—cruel, but necessary to maintain a healthy population. This is where “Britain’s Not Got Talent” meets “I’m a Tory. Get Me Out of Here”, as they are whittled away until the coronation of “the one”.

It is almost unbelievable that the right hon. Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson) is the runaway favourite, with all his baggage of Islamophobia and misogyny. He even now wants tax cuts for the rich in England to be partly paid for by national insurance contributions from Scotland. The only good thing about these senior Tories for all their drugs indiscretions, just drugs legislation and perhaps even “draw a line” under the process of Scottish independence.

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After all the difficulties, may we have a debate on drugs legislation and perhaps even “draw a line” under the problems? I do not think we should be locking up these senior Tories for all their drugs indiscretions, just as I do not think we should be locking up problem drug users who have addiction disorders, mental health issues or have suffered adverse childhood experiences. They should not be locked up either, but as with so many other issues, for this Government it is, “Do as I say, not as I do.” We have a criminal justice approach to drugs that locks up the poor and allows others to stand for the whole process of Scottish independence.

I listened carefully to the Leader of the House, but I still hear the candidates being prepared to suspend our democracy and prorogue Parliament to get this disastrous no deal through. That is the agenda of so many Members who are standing for the post of Prime Minister. Some of them refuse to rule it out. We need to hear clearly and definitively from the Leader of the House that he is not prepared to have our democracy suspended. Who would have believed that taking back control meant suspending our democracy and this House, when they ranted and raved about mythical, undemocratic Brussels bureaucrats denying us our democracy? We know who the true democracy deniers are now.

Mel Stride: The hon. Gentleman will have heard my answer in response to the hon. Member for Walsall South (Valerie Vaz) about prorogation.

Sir David Amess (Southend West) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend find time for a debate on strengthening the law on people who are found guilty of animal cruelty? I am sure the whole House was shocked at the recent hunt where someone was found guilty of feeding fox cubs to the hounds, yet that person can still keep animals. The law should certainly be changed.

Mel Stride: May I first pay full tribute to my hon. Friend for all the extremely effective and important campaigning that he does on animal cruelty? I should point out that the Government have taken this matter extremely seriously. We have increased the maximum sentence for animal cruelty from six months to five years. We have introduced CCTV coverage in slaughterhouses, and we have taken action on puppy farms and online sales of young dogs. The debate that my hon. Friend requests would perhaps be a good one for the Backbench Business Committee.

Ian Mearns: I am very pleased to be in charge of the business of the House. [Laughter.] I thank the Leader of the House for the business announcement.

Applications for estimates day debates must be submitted by tomorrow. We understand that a number of applications are being thought about or prepared, but we have not actually received any applications so far. The Backbench Business Committee will consider applications next Tuesday afternoon, and we understand that the debates will go ahead on 2 and 3 July.

May I reiterate the birthday wishes to my right hon. Friend and constituency neighbour the Member for Newcastle upon Tyne East (Mr Brown), our Chief Whip? I do wish him a very happy birthday. He has been very gentle with me recently, so I am very grateful for that.

The Leader of the House has just been extolling the Government’s record on employment, but 30 local and regional newspapers across the north of England have come together to campaign on Powering Up The North. Our chamber of commerce in the north-east of England has issued a report this week saying that employment has fallen by 20,000 over the past quarter in the north-east of England and by 26,000 over the past year. Unemployment in my constituency has grown month on month, and it now stands at 7.1%. May we have a debate in Government time on the northern powerhouse and the unprecedented unification of 30 local and regional newspapers across the north of England and on the disparity in economic progress between the regions of England and the south-east?

Mel Stride: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his questions and for the fine work he does as the Chair of the Backbench Business Committee. The House will have noted his very pertinent call for action on the estimates day debates and for applications to come through to meet tomorrow’s deadline so that those subjects can be debated in early July.

I note the hon. Gentleman’s request for a debate in Government time on the northern powerhouse. This Government are certainly extremely proud of the investment that has gone into the north. Specifically on the north-east, it has had faster productivity growth than London since 2010, and we are of course investing £600 million in infrastructure and jobs in that region.
Maggie Throup (Erewash) (Con): Just two days ago, a vehicle fire severely damaged a road bridge in my constituency between Sandiacre and Long Eaton. This has resulted in the road being closed, and a long diversion through the constituency of the right hon. Member for Broxtowe (Anna Soubry) on roads that are already congested. Will my right hon. Friend facilitate dialogue between the Department for Transport and Derbyshire County Council to ensure that we have a rapid assessment of this bridge and see what can be done to repair it quickly, so that people can travel freely again through my constituency?

Mel Stride: My hon. Friend’s raising of this very specific matter is entirely indicative of the very assiduous approach she takes to her constituency matters. She is quite right to raise this issue, and I can confirm that I will do whatever I can to assist her in the approaches she is seeking to be made to the Department for Transport.

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): May I caution the Leader of the House against trading song lyrics with my fellow colleague from MP4, the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart), and indeed the shadow Leader of the House, the hon. Member for Walsall South (Valerie Vaz), not least because the preceding line to the lyric the right hon. Gentleman quoted—

“Why don’t you come on over Valerie?!”—

from “Valerie” is:

“Stop making a fool out of me”,

which is exactly what she will be doing here every week. And

“So I say

Thank you for the music”,

but let us stick to the business of the House.

Will the Leader of the House at the very least endorse the words of the leadership contender he is supporting this afternoon, who has said:

“Proroguing parliament in order to try to get no-deal through, I think, would be wrong for many reasons.”

Will he at least endorse that?

Mel Stride: As for the lyric

“Stop making a fool out of me”,

nobody was attempting to make a fool out of the hon. Gentleman, I can assure him.

On proroguing, I have made it very clear that the view of Government Members and of the Government is that this should not be used as a device to ensure that Parliament is absent from the decisions that may have to be made towards the end of October and, furthermore, that it would not be appropriate for Her Majesty the Queen to be drawn into those kinds of political decisions.

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): GCHQ, headquartered in my constituency, is now in its centenary year. It was founded in 1919, under the then name of the Government Code and Cypher School. May we have a debate to allow hon. Members from across the House to pay tribute to the brilliant men and women who work in that organisation and who keep our country safe in an increasingly complex and dangerous world?

Mel Stride: My hon. Friend raises an important point, and within our security services there are many unsung heroes who make many sacrifices—some, indeed, the ultimate sacrifice—for the defence and security of our country. It would be a good subject for a debate, perhaps in this case an Adjournment debate.

Siobhain McDonagh (Mitcham and Morden) (Lab): Mr Fearon delayed his pension for two years. He did not know, and he was not informed by the Department for Work and Pensions, that the law had changed, and that if he wanted to reclaim that backdated two years’ pension in a lump sum, he could get only one year, with the second year paid in instalments over 20 years. But Mr Fearon does not have 20 years. He has lung cancer and has had his last session of palliative chemotherapy. He has lost out on a year of his pension for which he worked all his life. Will the Leader of the House find time for a debate on the effect of those pension changes on people who are terminally ill, and will he go in to bat for Mr Fearon?

Mel Stride: I cannot comment on a specific case, but given the terms with which the hon. Lady presented it, I recognise that it perhaps needs to be looked at rather urgently. I would be happy to facilitate whatever approaches can be made in that respect to the Department for Work and Pensions, and if she would like to write or speak to me after business questions, perhaps we could work out the best way to do so.

Neil O’Brien (Harborough) (Con): May we have a debate on police pension sharing arrangements after divorce, which I believe to be a genuine scandal? One of my constituents has lost tens of thousands of pounds—roughly a quarter of his pension—because the part of his pension that was supposed to be paid to his ex-wife is not being paid to anybody and is being pocketed by the Treasury as a result of decisions made several decades ago. I think that is a genuine scandal, and I wonder whether we could debate it in this House.

Mel Stride: In the first instance, it might be worth my hon. Friend writing to me with the details of that case, so that I can ensure appropriate discussions with Ministers at the Treasury or the Department for Work and Pensions.

Karl Turner (Kingston upon Hull East) (Lab): It is shocking that hundreds of people each year are sent to prison for non-payment of council tax, often because the law is wrongly interpreted by magistrates, and the issue affects the most vulnerable and often the poorest people in our society. Chris Daw QC has started an e-petition, calling on the Government to change the law. This requires just a tiny change to the law, so may we have a debate in Government time so that we can sort out this terrible injustice?

Mel Stride: I think that I can offer the hon. Gentleman something a little more useful than a debate, because if he has specific ideas about how what he expressed as a relatively modest change to the law might make a big difference in this area, I would be interested in discussing that with him and putting those ideas to the relevant Ministers.

Nigel Huddleston (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): On 22 June, I shall again have the honour of opening the Droitwich Spa food and drink festival, which for many
years has been led by an inspiring man called Patrick Davis, who will be standing down this year from those responsibilities. May we have a debate to celebrate the many food and drink festivals, boat festivals, heritage events, plum festivals and a whole host of things that happen right across the country, to celebrate our food and drink, our heritage and our culture, and to show our thanks to the many people who do so much to make that happen?

Mel Stride: I echo everything that my hon. Friend has said about the Droitwich Spa food and drink festival, and if I am in that area at the appropriate time I would very much look forward to attending it. Curiously, somebody on the Front Bench told me that my hon. Friend’s favourite food is asparagus—I do not know the relevance of that, but I am sure there will be plenty of it at the food fair.

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): Despite being part of Lloyds Banking Group, the Halifax, which is predominantly located in England, offers more competitive products to customers across the board than the Bank of Scotland, which is almost solely based in Scotland. There is only one Bank of Scotland branch in England, but there are three branches of Halifax in Scotland, which shows clear geographical discrimination against consumers in Scotland and is deeply unfair. Will the Leader of the House make a statement and say whether he agrees that that is unfair? Does he agree that Lloyds Banking Group should apologise and offer all customers the best deals, regardless of where they live in the UK?

Mel Stride: Clearly, I do not know all the specifics of the matter the hon. Lady brings before the House. However, we do have Scotland questions on Wednesday 19 June, and that might be a good opportunity to ventilate the issue.

Grahame Morris (Easington) (Lab): I know we are all concerned about ending poverty pay. Yesterday, I was among a group of MPs who met care workers from AFG—the Alternative Futures Group—who are being paid below the minimum wage because of cuts to sleepover rates.

Closer to home, staff employed by Interserve at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office are on strike in a dispute over pay and terms and conditions. The Government really should be concerned to learn that these hard-working staff, one of whom was awarded an MBE in the recent honours list for his years of work in the Department, are being paid less than they should be. Food banks have had to be set up to support these workers, who are currently in dispute. May I urge the Leader of the House to ask the Foreign and Commonwealth Office questions on Tuesday 25 June.

Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab): Earlier this week, it was revealed that Nottingham University Hospitals NHS Trust continues to burn thousands of tonnes of coal to heat its buildings at City Hospital, despite promising residents two years ago that the 50-year-old boiler would be shut down permanently. The hospital is blaming the Treasury for the delay, but frankly that is no comfort to the visitors, staff, patients and local people whose health is damaged by air pollution. May we have a statement from the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care—I guess he may have more time on his hands after today—on how he intends to end this shameful situation?

Mel Stride: On the general point about coal, this Government’s green policies led to the longest extended period of our not having to use coal for power generation in our history, but in Cumbria a Labour council is seeking to reopen a coalmine. We take this issue extremely seriously. On the specific matter of Nottingham hospitals and air pollution, if the hon. Lady would like to write to me, I will make sure the relevant Minister engages with her in an appropriate manner.

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): May we have a debate in Government time on the privatisation of visa processing? My Swinton constituent Jack McGruer wants his fiancé Sarah to come over from Brazil, but due to a breakdown between the Home Office and VFS Global, they find themselves in limbo. Will the Leader of the House use his good offices to help me intervene with the Home Office, and try to get them out of limbo and back together in the UK?

Mel Stride: I would be very happy to do so.

John Cryer (Leyton and Wanstead) (Lab): It has been widely known for some time that the Ministry of Defence, for reasons best known to itself, is planning to hand over the MOD fire and rescue service to Capita. There has been no statement and no indication of what lies behind the process or this decision. Will the Secretary of State at least come to the House and make a statement on why the MOD is planning to hand over this valued service to Capita to prop up that company?

Mel Stride: The hon. Gentleman raises a very specific point, so I think the best way to move forward would be for him to write to me. I will then be very happy to take up the matter with Ministers.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): Following on from the question by the Chair of the Backbench Business Committee and his reference to newspapers in the north, including The Yorkshire Post and the Hull Daily Mail, campaigning on Powering Up The North, on 23 June it will be five years since the then Chancellor George Osborne launched the northern powerhouse. I would like to echo the Chair’s request for a debate on what progress has been made in closing the gap between the north and London and the south-east, on giving the north real devolved powers to drive change and not just have talking shops, and on

With regard to the specific issue and the strike that he raises, I would be very happy, if he wants to write to me, to facilitate a meeting with the relevant Minister. I also point him to Foreign and Commonwealth Office
whether it is time to regenerate the Humber docklands in the same way and with the same impetus as the London docklands were regenerated over 40 years ago.

Mel Stride: This is the second question calling for a debate on the northern powerhouse. As I said in answer to the first, I think it is a very good idea. We should collectively across the House, depending on the routes available, think about having such a debate, principally, from the Government’s point of view, because we feel we have made a substantial commitment to the north of England. We have had unprecedented investment in better transport across the north, as the hon. Lady will know, with £13 billion of investment so far—a record level—and further planned investment to come.

Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): Dozens of my young constituents attend the Buchanan and St Ambrose High School campus in nearby Coatbridge. There has been much concern about the health of children attending the school since reports of teachers falling ill with the same type of cancer, and one boy with autism going blind, reportedly due to arsenic poisoning. Given that the site the school is built on is a former landfill that included arsenic, I am very grateful to the Scottish Government for having instituted an inquiry into this matter, following representations from Fulton MacGregor and Alex Neil, but I hope that the parents are involved at an early stage. Will the Leader of the House bring about a debate on building public buildings, including schools, on former landfill sites, so that we can get to the bottom of this?

Mel Stride: What the hon. Gentleman describes is obviously of considerable concern. I am pleased there is an inquiry, as he has set out, and I would certainly recommend that he raise the matter at Scottish questions on 19 June.

Jessica Morden (Newport East) (Lab): Last weekend, another unauthorised encampment was set up in Newport, this time on Beechwood Park, causing huge frustration and cost for residents, local authorities and the police. The Government have recently consulted on extra powers for local authorities and the police to deal with such circumstances, so may we have a quick update from Ministers on giving our authorities the powers they need?

Mel Stride: That would be a very good question to ask on Monday 17 June at Housing, Communities and Local Government questions.

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): May we have a statement or debate on the actions of the Home Office contractor Serco, which yesterday announced that it will go ahead with 300 lock-change evictions of asylum seekers before its contract ends in September? Does the Leader of the House recognise the anger and disgust of many Glaswegians at the actions of Serco, and does he agree that the Home Office should instruct Serco to halt that policy, especially given that there are live legal proceedings brought by a Glasgow South West constituent, who is appealing this decision in the Inner House of the Court of Session?

Mel Stride: I believe the hon. Gentleman tabled an urgent question on this matter that was not granted, so I recognise how important it is to him. If he writes to me in more detail, I will make sure that appropriate Ministers are engaged on it.

Anna Soubry (Broxtowe) (Change UK): Madam Deputy Speaker, I warn you and everyone else that I am about to use the C-word. It is 203 sleeps until Christmas, which most people of course will welcome, but it is also 140 days before we are due to leave the European Union without a deal, which business certainly does not want, and for which there is no majority in this place or the country. Unfortunately, Labour Front Benchers were unable yesterday to deliver enough votes from their own MPs to begin the process of stopping us crashing out of the EU without a deal. The Leader of the House, who is a good man and will always do his best, has said that the Government take the view that Parliament should not be prorogued by whoever is our next Prime Minister, to the exclusion of Parliament, so that we crash out without a deal—so the Government apparently think that would be the wrong thing for any future Prime Minister to do. What will he do to ensure that Parliament takes control of the process, and that we do not leave without a deal at the end of October because of an irresponsible Prime Minister?

Mel Stride: The Government’s future position will of course be determined by a new Prime Minister, but I feel confident, from all I have heard from those putting themselves forward for that position, that all of them recognise that a deal is the best way forward. The answer to the right hon. Lady’s question, I think, is that the best, most secure, most sensible and rational way forward for us as a Parliament is to come together and support a deal with the European Union.

Martin Whitfield (East Lothian) (Lab): Will the Leader of the House join me in congratulating Scott Glynn of Tranent in East Lothian, who was awarded an MBE in Her Majesty’s birthday honours list? Since 2013, the Walk With Scott Foundation has raised over £300,000 for local communities and charities, but more importantly Scott brings people together to chat, talk and make new friends. May we have a debate on the role of volunteers in keeping our societies strong, safe and together?

Mel Stride: A short while ago, of course, we had a very good debate on the voluntary sector. I recognise its utter importance and, like the hon. Gentleman, I salute all that it does. I echo his remarks and congratulate Scott Glynn on his well deserved MBE.

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): I am assisting a veteran’s widow who is living on the breadline in Bosnia, on an armed forces pension. She loses a significant proportion of her pension due to a steep service charge for processing her cheque, and she has to receive a cheque because the UK cannot transfer funds electronically to Bosnia. Will the Leader of the House ask his former colleagues in the Treasury to find a way to ensure that she and others like her are not penalised, and to make a statement setting out the solution to the problem?

Mel Stride: The hon. Gentleman raises a specific matter regarding the use of cheques to pay pensions. I would be very happy to take that up—perhaps in conjunction with him, if he writes to me—with the relevant Minister at the Treasury.

Stephanie Peacock (Barrow and Furness) (Lab): The Government stated in answer to my written question that they do not collect centrally the figures for spending
on veterans' support services by region. May we have a Government statement to determine where money is spent on supporting veterans who have served their country?

Mel Stride: I do not have sight of the precise presentation of those statistics at this moment. However, if the hon. Lady dropped me a line about that, I would be very happy to take it up, see what the situation is and discuss with Ministers whether this might be done slightly differently or on a more disaggregated basis, as she suggests.

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): May we have a statement, or indeed, a Government U-turn, on TV licences, so that over 3 million pensioners continue to receive free TV licences?

Mel Stride: There has actually been a statement on free TV licences, which will be—[Interruption.] It may have been an urgent question, but I refer the hon. Gentleman to that.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I again welcome the news that Asia Bibi has been relocated to Canada after being falsely accused of blasphemy in Pakistan. Unfortunately, the blasphemy laws are still in place, and are still being used to persecute religious minorities. In fact, the very cell that held Asia Bibi is now occupied by Shagufta Kausar and Shafqat Masih, two Christians also falsely accused of blasphemy. Worse still, in February, upon hearing that four women had been accused of blasphemy, an angry mob attacked a Christian village, leading to the displacement of approximately 200 Christian families. Will the Leader of the House agree to a statement or debate on this very important issue?

Mel Stride: The best place that I can direct the hon. Gentleman to is questions to the Speaker’s Committee on the Electoral Commission, which are on 20 June.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): The consumer safety Minister—the hon. Member for Rochester and Strood (Kelly Tolhurst)—has finally told Whirlpool UK that she intends to order the recall of at least half a million of its dangerous tumble dryers, responsible for hundreds of fires in homes across the UK. Whirlpool has until tomorrow to respond. May we have a statement on Monday, so that the Government can say, after four years of inaction on the worst consumer safety crisis of modern times, how they intend to proceed?

Mel Stride: On the face of it, there is clearly a very serious issue here, which has been highlighted in the past. It is very good that the Minister has intervened in this way to make sure that action will be taken.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): On the day of the European elections, my constituent, Christine Fletcher, had to rush her unwell daughter to hospital for a brain scan. Christine could not then get a proxy vote, because she was not the person who was incapacitated by the medical emergency, yet as far back as 2015 the Electoral Commission recommended an extension of the grounds for proxy voting to cover such circumstances. May we get a Government statement on when they will adopt such a sensible, simple measure, so that people such as Christine do not have additional stress when they are dealing with an already stressful situation?

Mel Stride: The best place that I can direct the hon. Gentleman to is questions to the Speaker’s Committee on the Electoral Commission, which are on 20 June.

Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): I have had complaints from two of my smaller charities about a letter that they received from the noble Lord Pickles on behalf of The Parliamentary Review, asking them to take part in a competition by submitting 1,000 words on what a worthy charity is. The only problem is that they are then asked to cough up £950 for what they wrote to appear online, and £2,800 for it to be in print. Does the Leader of the House think that it is appropriate for people to trade on the name of Parliament? And might he just have a quiet word with the noble Lord, and all the other great and good people who put their name to this scheme?

Mel Stride: I do not know the details of the matter to which the hon. Gentleman refers, but on the basis of what he has said on the Floor of the House, I would like to know a bit more about it. If he were to write to me, I would be very happy to look into the matter.
Hong Kong

12.17 pm

The Minister for Asia and the Pacific (Mark Field): The proposed changes to Hong Kong’s extradition laws have understandably caused grave concern in Parliament and across the country. Already this week I have responded to an urgent question and an Adjournment debate on the issue. I should now like to update the House on the latest developments.

Overnight on 11 June, thousands of mainly young protesters blocked the roads around the Hong Kong central Government offices and the Legislative Council complex. There have also been violent exchanges between protesters and police. I appreciate that these scenes will have shocked many Members of the House and many millions of our constituents, and I should like to take this opportunity to appeal again for calm and considered dialogue.

 Freedoms of association, speech and expression are all guaranteed by the joint declaration signed in 1984 by the Government of the People's Republic of China and the United Kingdom and enshrined in the Hong Kong Basic Law. I am sure that the House will join me in expressing grave concern at the violence that has occurred. It is imperative not only that any protests are conducted in a peaceful manner, but that the authorities’ response is proportionate.

Despite the violence that occurred yesterday—I should report that since that time, there has mercifully been a return to calm in the vicinity of the Hong Kong buildings to which I referred—it is important to recognise the unprecedented and overwhelmingly peaceful expression of public opposition that we saw at the march on 9 June, with families, church groups, business owners and professional associations all well represented. This was one of the largest single demonstrations of public concern in Hong Kong since the handover in July 1997.

 There can be no doubt that the strength of public feeling in Hong Kong is profound about the proposed changes to Hong Kong’s extradition laws, and of course their broader implications. As the Foreign Secretary made clear in his statement yesterday, we urge the Hong Kong Government, even at this late stage, to heed those concerns and to engage in meaningful dialogue with local and international stakeholders. Now is surely the time to pause to reflect upon the impact of these controversial proposals. It is vital that the measures are subject to full legislative scrutiny and that the Hong Kong Government give proper consideration to all alternative proposals.

 The proposed Bill had been due for a Second Reading on 12 June. However, the planned debate has been postponed until further notice owing to the protests. A vote on the proposals was due on 20 June. It is not clear yet whether the protests will affect that timetable.

 Madam Deputy Speaker, you will already be aware that the UK Government are fully engaged on this issue. I spoke on Monday about some of the actions we have already taken, including the Foreign Secretary’s joint statement with his Canadian counterpart on 30 May, the British consul general’s statements locally, and our engagement with all levels of the Hong Kong Government, including the Chief Executive, Carrie Lam, herself. In all these contacts we have reiterated our message of allowing time for proper consultation, and for adequate safeguards to be included in any legislation to address key human rights concerns.

 In addition to the Foreign Secretary’s statement yesterday, in which he called upon the Hong Kong Government to listen to the concerns of the people and to take steps to preserve Hong Kong’s rights and freedoms and its high degree of autonomy, he also made those concerns clear directly to the Chief Executive, Carrie Lam. We shall continue to engage the Hong Kong Government on this critical issue and to raise our concerns with the Chinese Government, reiterating the fundamental importance of upholding the Sino-British joint declaration.

 The British consul general to Hong Kong, Andy Heyn, most recently discussed developments in Hong Kong, including the extradition proposals, with the Director of the Hong Kong and Macao Affairs Office and the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Beijing in April 2019. I have been in very close contact with him in recent days.

 I note that the Chinese ambassador to London commented on the BBC’s “Newsnight” programme last night that the joint declaration is, as he put it, an “historic document” that has “completed its mission”. Once again I strongly disagree. The joint declaration remains as valid today as it was when it was signed over 35 years ago. That joint declaration is a legally binding international treaty, registered with the United Nations. Its objectives clearly apply to both of its signatories—the Government of the People’s Republic of China and the UK. It remains in force, and it remains acutely relevant to the conduct of day-to-day life in Hong Kong. We expect China to abide by its obligations.

 I should make it clear that we do not believe that the proposed changes to the extradition laws in themselves breach the joint declaration, as the treaty is silent on matters of extradition. However, we are concerned that the proposals, as currently framed, risk leaving the extradition process open to political interference. That could, of course, in future undermine Hong Kong’s high degree of autonomy and the rights and freedoms, guaranteed in the joint declaration, that are of course central to its continued success. Those concerns are heightened by the knowledge that the court system in mainland China lacks many of the judicial safeguards that exist in Hong Kong. We remain concerned about the continuing detention and trials of human rights lawyers and defenders, and the lack of due process and judicial transparency within mainland China. There is, of course, alarm at the prospect that fear of politically motivated extradition to China could cause a chilling effect on Hong Kong’s rights and freedoms, and more insidiously might result in increasing self-censorship.

 Hong Kong matters hugely to the United Kingdom, not only because of our shared history. There are some 300,000 UK citizens living there, and many more travel to and through Hong Kong every year. Hong Kong is one of the most thriving, exciting, dynamic cities in the world. It retains its distinctive identity, both within China and internationally. It is, of course, a global financial centre and serves as a gateway to one of the biggest markets in the world.

 We remain committed to strengthening our rich and wide-ranging relationship with Hong Kong. We shall continue to work together as partners in support of global free trade, and we shall continue to develop our
bilateral trade links with Hong Kong. However, it is also vital for Hong Kong’s continuing success that one country, two systems is fully protected, and that the rights and freedoms that make Hong Kong such a prosperous city are safeguarded.

I once again call on the Hong Kong Government to pause, to reflect and to take meaningful steps to address the concerns of the people, businesses, the legal professionals, judges and the international community about the proposed changes to the extradition law. We must, and we shall, continue to press them so to do. I commend this statement to the House.

12.24 pm

Emily Thornberry (Islington South and Finsbury) (Lab): I thank the Minister of State for advance sight of his statement, and for the customary tone of concern and deliberation that he brings to these issues. At the outset, I should like to ask him a couple of specific questions about the proposed extradition Bill, which I do not think were covered in his statement.

First, have the Government sought or received any safeguards from the Hong Kong authorities that, once that proposed Bill is on the statute book, the powers it contains cannot and will not be extended to include the extradition of political activists and dissidents? Secondly, what safeguards have been sought or received with respect to British citizens living in Hong Kong and British national (overseas) passport holders, should the proposed extradition Bill be passed?

However, as the Minister of State has rightly observed, our concerns go deeper than those specific issues—the implications of the extradition Bill and the violent protests we have seen on the streets of Hong Kong in recent days. Our concerns also must go to what has undoubtedly been the steady erosion over recent years of compliance with the joint UK-Sino declaration, signed in 1984—the agreement that was supposed to enshrine the one country, two systems approach, to ensure “a high degree of autonomy” for Hong Kong and to protect its political, cultural and social rights and freedoms for at least 50 years after the 1997 handover. Just 22 years on, we see those freedoms and that autonomy being steadily taken away.

Last September the Hong Kong National party was banned, on so-called grounds of “national security”—the first time since 1997 that any Hong Kong party had been outlawed by the authorities. In April, nine individuals—students, professors and human rights activists—were found guilty of “incitement to public nuisance”, just for the supposed crime of organising the 2014 umbrella protests, facing sentences of up to seven years in prison. Now we have the proposed extradition Bill, which many fear is the thin end of the wedge when it comes to Hong Kong’s judicial independence. No wonder opinion polling by the University of Hong Kong has found that public confidence in the one country, two systems commitment has fallen from 77% in 2008 to just 40% today. No wonder our Foreign Affairs Committee has said that China is moving closer to a “one country, one system” approach. It is, sadly, no wonder that we have, as a result, seen protests in Hong Kong in recent days, and the growth of the pro-independence movement in recent years.

So the big question today is, what are the UK Government prepared to do to demand that the Chinese authorities go back to the commitments that they made in the 1984 statement? As the Minister of State has said, the Chinese ambassador said last night that that is an historic document. But the Chinese have been saying that for two years. Two years ago they said it was an historical document that had no “practical significance” and was “not binding”. I agree with the Minister of State when he condemns those comments, but we have to ask, is it any wonder that the Chinese are so dismissive of the joint agreement, and prepared to commit flagrant breaches of it, if we as a country are not prepared to protest when they do so? Let me make it clear: I mean that not as a personal criticism of the Minister of State, but as a general indictment of the Government’s approach over recent years, which has not been as clear and robust as just set out by the Minister of State.

I am not the only one making that indictment. Last year it was Chris Patten, the former Member for Bath, the last British Governor of Hong Kong, who described the Government’s stance toward China as craven, in seeking a trade deal at the expense of advocacy for human rights in Hong Kong. He said that a series of “outrageous breaches” of the 1984 declaration had prompted little more than “a slightly embarrassed clearing of the throat” and some “tut-tutting” from the Government. This is a theme going back to 2015, the year after those umbrella protests, when George Osborne visited China and was praised by the state-run media for being “the first Western official in recent years who has stressed more the region’s business potential instead of finding fault over the human-rights issue”.

Last year, after her own visit, the Prime Minister was praised by the Chinese state media for “sidestepping” human rights in favour of “pragmatic collaboration”. They concluded:

“For the Prime Minister, the losses outweigh the gains if she appeases the British media at the cost of the visit’s friendly atmosphere.”

But those losses do not outweigh the gains if they amount to the erosion of democracy and autonomy in Hong Kong, if they amount to the abandonment of the 1984 joint agreement, and if they amount to the endangerment of the rights and freedoms of Hong Kongers, including British nationals and passport holders.

Let me end by asking the Minister what action he and the Government will be taking, not just to express concern about these recent events, but to end their “craven” approach to China and to demand that the Beijing Government return to honouring the terms of the 1984 agreement.

Mark Field: I thank the shadow Foreign Secretary for her contribution, and I strongly agree with what she said towards the end of it. We clearly must stand up at this stage, as indeed we have. I think it is a misapprehension to suppose that we have been “craven” in relation to the very delicate issues in relation to China, which are broad-ranging and involve not just trade but other aspects of a relationship with a leading nation in global affairs.
We believe it is vital that the extradition arrangements in Hong Kong are in line with the high degree of autonomy and the rights and freedoms set down in the joint declaration. We believe that that is vital not just to Hong Kong’s best interests, but to China’s. It is very evident that, even if there is a self-interest on the part of the People’s Republic of China, from its perspective a recognised global offshore financial centre providing not just financial but legal services—the idea of a common law legal system, and the idea of having the confidence of international capital markets—will be vital to its own economic growth, and not least to the future of its ambitious belt and road initiative.

We are, however, very concerned about the potential effects of these proposals, and we would like to see a pause. As the right hon. Lady will know, this issue came to the fore not—according to our understanding—at Beijing’s behest, but as a result of a particularly difficult case: that of a Hong Kong national who had allegedly committed a murder in Taiwan and then returned to Hong Kong for his extradition to be made to Taiwan. The Taiwanese authorities have not demanded that. None the less, that has made for a difficult situation as far as extradition is concerned.

As I said on Monday in response to the urgent question from the hon. Member for Hornsey and Wood Green (Catherine West), we fully understand that there are wide ramifications, such as the prospect of relatively minor offences being subject to extradition involving UK or, indeed, other non-Hong Kong nationals and their being sent back to China on what might be trumped-up political charges, particularly given the anti-corruption drive introduced by President Xi’s Administration.

I hope that you will indulge me, Madam Deputy Speaker, and allow me to say a bit more. The right hon. Lady raised some general issues about the UK-China relationship, and I think that it would be appropriate to erase them at this stage.

We all know that the growth of China presents great opportunities, but also challenges. It is in our interests for China to support a rules-based international system, but it is pushing back in some key areas in that regard. We believe that the system is under huge strains, for a variety of reasons. We are entering a period of greater strategic competition, and engaging with China is vital for the preservation and evolution of existing structures. However, we do and will continue to challenge it when we disagree with, for instance, its approach to freedom of navigation in the South China sea. We speak up very strongly on human rights violations, such as those in Xinjiang.

We are active in ensuring that Hong Kong’s specific rights and freedoms, and high degree of autonomy, are respected in full. We take a very clear view of our own national security, along with other countries. Only last December, we named China as being responsible for a particularly damaging cyber-intrusion.

As we look to the coming decades, it is clear that our relationships with high-growth economies such as China will be increasingly important, not only to our growth but to the shape of the global system in the face of technological transformation. Striking a balance—there will, inevitably, always be a balance, but striking the right balance in our relationship—will be more important than ever.

James Duddridge (Rochford and Southend East) (Con): I am a sinophile, but Beijing’s current interactions with Hong Kong are deeply unhelpful, which is a particular issue because Hong Kong can be a bridge into and out of China. In 2017, on the eve of Carrie Lam’s ascension to the role of Chief Executive, I visited Hong Kong with other Members of Parliament, and met not only civil society groups but members of the legislature. Even back then, there was a palpable sense that there was a wrong trajectory, and a wrong pace towards greater integration. What message can we send from the House to civil society in Hong Kong, and in particular to members of the legislature, to show that we are there for them and are watching what is happening?

Mark Field: My hon. Friend obviously takes a great interest in these matters, having been a Foreign Office Minister in the past himself. I think that the biggest message we can send is the very fact that so much attention has been paid to the issue. This is the third parliamentary debate on it. Our debates are clearly followed avidly in Hong Kong, and will continue to be so.

We want to see peaceful demonstrations. It is worth pointing out that the rule of law does apply to demonstrations. At the time of some of the Occupy movement demonstrations, when there was an over-reaction, or a perceived over-reaction, from the Hong Kong police, fines and indeed prison sentences were meted out. We want to ensure that the rule of law and the autonomy that allows freedom of expression in Hong Kong are maintained. That is underpinned in the joint declaration, and, indeed, in all the arrangements that underpin the essence of one country, two systems.

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): I am grateful for advance sight of the Minister’s statement, and I welcome his strong words, but those strong words must be matched by strong actions.

Legal professionals have expressed concern about the rights of those sent across the border to be tried. The conviction rate in Chinese courts is as high as 99%, and arbitrary detentions, torture and denial of legal representation of one’s own choosing are common.

I am sure the Minister will agree that the fundamental rights of freedom of expression and assembly have been shown to be at risk in Hong Kong, with at least 72 protesters hospitalised by police. I wonder whether he has seen some of the social media reportage of protesters who have been protecting journalists. One journalist working for CBS Asia had been given a helmet and protected from tear gas by protesters. The protesters were also turning up the next day to clean up rubbish and ensure that it was recycled. I think that demonstrates the spirit in which they are trying to express their views.

Does the Minister agree that police violence such as this is unacceptable? What representations has he made, and will he make, to his counterparts in Hong Kong about the need for a de-escalation?

Many Hong Kongers fear that authorities will use the proposed extradition law to target political enemies, and have expressed concern about arbitrary detentions and the use of torture. Following a recent report from the Foreign Affairs Committee which called for the Foreign and Commonwealth Office to redouble its efforts to “hold China to account through UN mechanisms, public statements and private diplomacy for its human rights violations”,
what conversations have the Foreign Secretary, and the Minister himself, had with his Chinese counterpart about the need to protect human rights and freedom of expression?

Mark Field: I thank the hon. Lady for her constructive comments. I think we know from what we have seen on our television screens and on the vast social media that this issue is of grave concern—as she said, 72 people have apparently been hospitalised. As I said in my response to the urgent question on Monday, our biggest single concern is that the Chinese legal system is so disaligned with the Hong Kong system, which has led to arbitrary detentions, delays and the like.

We clearly want to see no violence either from protestors or in disproportionate action from the police, and clearly we would hope, and very much expect given what has happened with the Occupy movements in years gone by, that those guilty of disproportionate action or indeed of violence would be properly brought to account.

Representations are made to the Chinese Government on a vast range of areas; they are meat and drink to all of us as FCO Ministers, as they are to Ministers in a number of other Departments. We will continue to have a six-monthly report on Hong Kong; we are criticised at every opportunity by the Chinese embassy for so doing, but we believe the one country, two systems model must be maintained. The management of it is obviously a matter for the Hong Kong Government; however, the Chinese Government are on record as supporting the extradition proposals.

We will continue to raise Hong Kong at all levels with China, and clearly, as the hon. Lady will appreciate given the importance of the issue, over the course of this week there have been plenty of opportunities, both with China and our Hong Kong counterparts, to make clear our grave concerns, which are shared by millions of our constituents.

Sarah Newton (Truro and Falmouth) (Con): The Minister has made a very important statement today. He has absolutely confirmed that the Government are going to step up their support for the joint declaration treaty and look at what more we can do to enforce it, and of course that is welcome; but I am very concerned—as I am sure others across this Chamber and across the nation are—for the more than 300,000 British citizens who are in Hong Kong now. While we all want to see a peaceful resolution through strong diplomacy to resolve this issue, what assurance can the Minister give us that the FCO stands ready to support our citizens should the situation deteriorate?

Mark Field: My hon. Friend is absolutely right: we will do our level best and do whatever we can from our side to calm some of the passions, not least because of our 300,000 UK nationals there. We are not aware at present of any British nationals being caught up in the violence of the past 48 hours. The question of British nationals overseas was brought up by my hon. Friend’s constituency neighbour, my hon. Friend the Member for St Austell and Newquay (Steve Double), and we do have some ongoing obligations in that regard.

We are concerned about the potential detrimental impact of these extradition proposals on the rights and freedoms of all people resident in and travelling through Hong Kong. At present the FCO is not providing specific advice relating to the proposed extradition Bill as it affects British nationals overseas, particularly as this legislation is still under consideration. However, we do believe that it is of the utmost importance that any extradition arrangements respect the high degree of autonomy and the rights and freedoms of the Basic Law. The arrangements will of course apply to all citizens, but we particularly have British nationals overseas and UK nationals very much in our heart, and will ensure our consul general does all he can to deal with any of the concerns raised.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): Yesterday a young Hong Kong woman came to my office and showed me pictures of what had happened to friends of hers who had been protesting in Hong Kong. She showed me videos of tear gas being used and the injuries they had sustained as a result of rubber bullets being used. These things happen because the authorities that employ these methods think they can get away with it. She understood, as I think we should all understand, that the joint declaration is now under attack not just from the People’s Republic of China but from Carrie Lam’s Administration in Hong Kong itself.

As the hon. Member for Rochford and Southend East (James Duddridge) said, the question is what signals we send, and I have to say to the Minister that the signal that he sends today in saying that the UK Government do not see the extradition changes as a breach of the joint declaration is fundamentally wrong and has to change. The purpose of that joint declaration is to protect the human rights of the people of Hong Kong. The legislation proposed by Carrie Lam’s Government is a fundamental attack on these human rights, and if we are to stand by the joint declaration we should be opposing these changes unambiguously and vigorously at every turn. I have to say to the Minister that it is not good enough to hide behind a question of legal construction when this is actually about our political determination.

Mark Field: I think that is a rather unfair characterisation of our position, if I may say so. I know that the right hon. Gentleman has a long-standing interest in Hong Kong—this has been our third exchange at the Dispatch Box over the course of this week—but I was merely making the point that the joint declaration was silent on the issue of extradition. We very much feel that the spirit of the joint declaration is fundamental, for the reasons I have set out about the high degree of autonomy, freedom of expression and the like, but I was just making the narrow point that extradition was not raised in the joint declaration of 35 years ago.

The right hon. Gentleman touched on the use of tear gas and rubber bullets, and I would therefore like to talk about export licences; I know this has been brought up in the pages of The Guardian today. The last export licence from the UK for tear gas hand grenades and tear gas cartridges used for training purposes by the Hong Kong police was in July 2018. The last export licence for rubber bullets was in July 2015. We rejected an open licence for riot shields as recently as April 2019. The issue of export licences is close to all our hearts, and it comes up time and again in our work overseas. We are monitoring the situation very closely and will of course undertake to review all current export licences. We will have no qualms in revoking any licences found no
longer to be consistent with the consolidated criteria, including criterion 2, which I think the right hon. Gentleman will be aware of, dealing with respect for human rights.

Mike Gapes (Ilford South) (Change UK): The Minister rightly criticised the Chinese ambassador’s remarks on “Newsnight” yesterday, but is this not part of a pattern, as has been said? Is it not clear that there is no independent judiciary in mainland China, so anybody who is either taken illegally—as has been the case in the past, as with the booksellers—or taken with the complicity of the Hong Kong Government authorities is actually potentially facing an unfair trial by the Communist regime, with terrible consequences? Is it not time that we were more robust in what we say about the nature of the Chinese regime, and that, instead of pulling our punches because we are so afraid that our economic situation post Brexit will make us weaker, we stood up for our values and the commitments we made when we signed and agreed the joint declaration and said that for 50 years there would be one country, two systems?

Mark Field: We absolutely stand up for one country, two systems, and will continue to do so. On the Floor of the House on Monday I expressed some deep concerns about the Chinese legal system, which have to be borne closely in mind when we are considering any changes that potentially lead to individuals being extradited from Hong Kong to the mainland, and we will continue to make those robust statements.

We are in a world where China is rising, however, and we have to maintain an engaged relationship, as I am well aware the hon. Gentleman understands. That points to the balance in diplomacy that I mentioned earlier. I would like to think we have worked together in forging constructive collaboration on a range of shared challenges including microbial health, climate change, the illegal wildlife trade, money laundering and even threats to international security over North Korea.

There is therefore a range of global challenges on which we have to build trust with China, but we also must accept that our values are fundamentally different, so I am afraid that there will always be a block. Rightly, we must have the confidence, along with partners, to stand up for the values that are close to our heart, but we also have to recognise from our own history that those values evolve over time. Working together and building a sense of trust with China, and indeed with rising nations in other parts of the world, is an important part of diplomacy and we shall continue to do so.

**BILL PRESENTED**

**DIVORCE, DISSOLUTION AND SEPARATION BILL**

*Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)*

Secretary David Gauke, supported by the Prime Minister, Secretary Sajid Javid, Secretary Amber Rudd, Lucy Frazer, Victoria Atkins and Will Quince, presented a Bill to make in relation to marriage and civil partnership in England and Wales provision about divorce, dissolution and separation; and for connected purposes.

*Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time tomorrow and to be printed* (Bill 404) *with explanatory notes* (Bill 404-EN).

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**Backbench Business**

**Social Housing**

12.50 pm

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House recognises that there is a housing crisis with too few genuinely affordable homes to rent and buy; further recognises that the number of new social rented homes built in recent years has been too low; notes that the Government has set a target to build 300,000 homes a year, which is unlikely to be achieved without building more social homes; further notes that Shelter’s recent report, A Vision for Social Housing, concluded that 3.1 million new social rented homes need to be built over the next 20 years; and calls on the Government to adopt a target of building 155,000 social rented homes, including at least 100,000 council homes, each year from 2022.

It is an honour to rise to discuss one of the most critical issues facing us, and I thank the Backbench Committee for affording me the opportunity to do this today. Sadly, looking round the Chamber, I see surprisingly few people here to share the debate. I thank those who are here, but I am surprised at how few there are, given the very real and pressing crisis that we face in this country. It is the foremost of all the crises that we face.

The housing market is fundamentally broken, and it is the social housing sector that has been the casualty. As a result, homelessness is up 50% and rough sleeping has risen 160% since 2010. Elsewhere, hundreds of thousands of people are living in homes that are not fit for human habitation, yet this is the fifth wealthiest country on the planet. Despite that apparent national wealth, we are impoverished by crushing personal debt, large mortgages, high private sector rents, student loans, significant unsecured debt as great as it was in 2007 and stagnant wages that have failed to keep up with the cost of living. It is no wonder that the UN rapporteur has observed us as a country in crisis where the social fabric is not just frayed at the edges but badly torn.

This week marks the second anniversary of the terrible tragedy of the Grenfell Tower fire, and we are reminded of how recent and current policy on social housing has failed and continues to fail our society, so how is it that the market and the policies that govern that market are not delivering the much-needed housing? The social housing report commissioned by Shelter in January estimates that the UK needs to build 155,000 social homes a year for the next couple of decades. That is the scale of the crisis. If good housing is fundamental to the quality of our lives, why is it not the basis for everything in our society? Lord Porter put it succinctly when he said that, with a housing problem, “you haven’t just got a housing problem, you’ve got an education problem, you’ve got a health problem, anti-social behaviour problem, whatever.”

It is clear that we need to reset the market and restore the principle that a decent home is a right owed to all, not a privilege for the few.

Darren Jones (Bristol North West) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that the market has failed in constituencies such as mine, where it is getting more and more expensive to either rent or buy, and that we therefore need to build council houses to provide security for people and their families, including accessible housing, given that more and more people with disabilities cannot find homes?
Matt Western: My hon. Friend makes an incredibly important point, and I will come on to it. I am particularly familiar with his constituency, and I know that many areas of our country have seen high house price inflation, which has priced out young people, a lot of whom would ordinarily want to stay in those communities. This needs to be urgently addressed through social housing.

Twelve months ago, I was fortunate enough to meet a former soldier at one of my Saturday surgeries. He was back in his home town of Warwick, having been discharged from the Army after 10 years’ service. A veteran of several tours, soldier Y found himself searching desperately for a job and a home, and he was not in a good place. He was really struggling. He had he been diagnosed with, and was clearly suffering from, post-traumatic stress disorder. Soldier Y was sofa-surfing. Until relatively recently, it would have been possible for him to access one of the hostels provided by Warwickshire County Council, but the cuts since 2013 have resulted in a huge drop in capacity and places such as Beauchamp House in Warwick are no longer available. I have mentioned soldier Y, but I could have spoken about any of the dozens of people I have met since my election in 2017, all of them desperate for help to resolve their own housing situations.

Matt Rodda (Reading East) (Lab): I would like to thank my hon. Friend for securing this debate, along with my hon. Friend the Member for Stroud (Dr Drew). I agree with him wholeheartedly about the need for a major council house building programme. The issue I would like to raise is the need for much greater funding for local authorities to build council houses. In my area of Reading, there has been an ambitious programme to build council houses within the limited scope of the funding that is available, but more funding is clearly needed. We have an excess of brownfield land in Reading, a former light industrial town. We have enough brownfield land to build all the houses that are needed until 2036, and I understand from colleagues that many other boroughs, towns and cities around the country face a similar situation in which former industrial land is available but there is no funding to enable the local authorities to build. Does my hon. Friend agree that that should be a priority for this Government?

Matt Western: My hon. Friend makes another important point. This is absolutely about the cost of providing housing and land and about how authorities are facilitated to do that. This is the most pressing issue of our time, as I have said, and Government policy should be to help our local authorities. Indeed, at one of the meetings of the parliamentary campaign for council housing, which I co-chair with my hon. Friend the Member for Stroud, Lord Porter made it clear that, in his view, “all the bad things in our society stem from bad housing, and the best way to fix any of those problems is to make sure as a fundamental that everybody’s got safe, secure, decent housing.” I could not agree with him more.

We only have to walk down streets such as the Parade in Leamington Spa—and, I am sure, any of the high streets across the country—to see some of the casualties of this crisis: rough sleepers crouching up in our doorways, or sitting at street corners crying out for help, asking for loose change, desperately trying to create personal order out of social disorder. Inevitably, there will be an ex-forces person among them, but no matter—they are all one community now. Surely civvy street was not meant to be this uncivilised or, for an ex-soldier, this ungrateful.

To understand how we got here and where we need to go, it is worth briefly considering the past and how times have changed. Had soldier Y been lucky enough to have been returning from the first world war rather than from Afghanistan 100 years on, he would have been greeted by the then Prime Minister’s promise of “homes fit for heroes”. Lloyd George recognised the importance of social provision and knew that because house building would be difficult it was only through subsidies that local authorities would be able to afford to deliver them. His progressive social and local authority approach kick-started the sector and resulted not just in a growth of housing supply but in improved standards in all new homes. It was actually following world war two that the council house really arrived. Enlightened administrators strove to deliver them, and none more so than the Attlee Government, which, despite the ravages of war and the shortage of materials, managed to build more than 1 million new homes to replace many of those that had been destroyed.

Stephanie Peacock (Barnsley East) (Lab): On that point, statistics show that the construction of social housing has fallen 90% since 2010? Under the right-to-buy scheme, houses are not replaced on a one-for-one basis, which has led to a drastic fall in provision. Does my hon. Friend agree that we need to look at how we can tackle these issues?

Matt Western: My hon. Friend makes an incredibly important point. We have seen an absolute crash in the supply of social homes, and I understand that only one every five we are losing. Those are the tragic numbers that underline this, and they explain why we are seeing so many social crises in our communities.

Sarah Newton (Truro and Falmouth) (Con): I should like to congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing this really important debate. Although there are not many colleagues on the Conservative Benches this afternoon, there is huge support for social housing on this side of the House. He made a point about numbers. Cornwall is not led by a Conservative council, so I am not making a party political point here. When I came to the House in 2010, Cornwall was delivering around 700 social homes each year, but in this past year, according to the Library, the number was 1,437. That is a doubling of the number of social homes available to people in Cornwall, which has a very challenging housing market because it is such a popular place for people to have second homes. Where communities and local authorities work together and innovate, it is possible to use the Government’s policies to meet local housing need.

Matt Western: I thank the hon. Lady for her intervention and I hope that she will make a speech later. Her point is valid and I am sure there are huge pressures in her community and other parts of Cornwall. I have discussed this very issue with many of her colleagues on the Government Benches, and I know that the right hon. Member for West Dorset (Sir Oliver Letwin) and Members from South in our doorways. There is a lot of hardship in our rural communities related to access to and requirement for social housing. What is being done in her constituency is admirable, but it comes down to
the ability to borrow and what can be done. She may be referring to provision by housing associations, but I am particularly keen that we should see a rapid ramp up in council housing provision if we are ever to achieve the 300,000-plus figures that everyone mentions.

As I was saying, the achievements of the post-war period were extraordinary, and under the Attlee Government an astonishing 80% of houses built were council houses. Materials were in short supply, but they achieved it. The boom continued under the incoming Conservative Government. In response to Churchill’s challenge, Macmillan who had been appointed Minister for Housing, delivered more than 750,000 council homes in just one year: things had never been so good.

The giddy heights of those years and new social housing developments ended abruptly at the end of the 1970s with the radical policy changes of the incoming Conservative Government, and one of their first moves was to cut public expenditure for housing. Giving council tenants the opportunity to buy the homes they were living in, at a generous discount, was one of the defining policies of the Thatcher era and more than 2 million council tenants took advantage of it.

Ms Karen Buck (Westminster North) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend acknowledge that one of the first acts of the incoming Conservative Government was to shift housing subsidy away from bricks and mortar and into housing benefit? It was a conscious policy decision and the consequence was not a shortage of money, but the housing benefit? It was a conscious policy decision and housing subsidy a way from bricks and mortar and into public assets. Changing that is the ambition behind my motion.

Matt Western: I thank my hon. Friend who is very learned on this topic, and I bow to her knowledge. She is right: what we have seen is a transfer of wealth from the public to the private sector. A big chunk of that budget has gone into private pockets, as opposed to into public assets. Changing that is the ambition behind my motion.

That period was a watershed: it developed our unhealthy obsession with housing and a dependence on the fortunes of the private sector to satisfy it. Rising house prices were all the talk in the pub and they became the nation’s conversation, fuelled by the press and an insatiable media seeking feel-good stories and helped along by the Government of the day. House prices seemed an impossibly good driver of the economy. Those who had capital and a good wage could buy a place and, through the sell-off of council houses, those fortunate enough to have access to money could bag a bargain. What was not to like?

Perhaps most striking was the impact on young people who rapidly realised the possibility of ownership was drifting away from them: data shows that at the age of 27, those born in the late 1980s had a home ownership rate of 25%, compared with 33% for those born five years earlier in the decade and 43% for those born 10 years earlier in the late 1970s. With hindsight—perhaps for some of us at the time—the excesses of the heady 1980s, 1990s and 2000s, when access to finance was unlimited and we saw the mass sell-off of council housing, were akin to financial ecstasy, but it would only be a matter of time before the market would go cold turkey. Of course it did, with the credit crunch and the global financial crash of 2007-08. At the core of that financial disaster was over-leveraged debt and bad property debt. Lending had reached unsustainable levels.

We reach the present day, and housing has become simply too expensive—ridiculously so against relatively flat incomes. The average house price in my constituency is £285,000, 20% more than the average in England and Wales. Supply has been constrained for decades, but now the wrong housing is being built in the wrong places, and it is unsustainable. People are increasingly being driven out of the communities that they work in, such as in my constituency of Warwick and Leamington, and that threatens the local economy. Though average salaries are greater than the average for England and Wales, they are only 10% higher, meaning an absolute differential of 10% against the average house price. Put another way, the ratio of house price to wage is 9.2; for England and Wales it is 8.0.

Despite all that, the council has built just eight social homes in the past four years. Soldier Y is not just an individual: he is the victim of a systemic problem in our housing provision—market is no longer the right word. That is why we need to re-set the sector. Yes, the Government have set an ambition of building 300,000 homes, but they are falling way short with just 223,300 built last year, even with the numbers being distorted by the permitted development of office blocks that are often wholly unsuitable to long-term or family accommodation. While 47,000 new affordable homes were delivered in 2017-18, 57% were homes for affordable rent, 23% for shared ownership and just 14% for social rent. For many people, affordable rents are no longer affordable, given that in reality they can be set up to 80% of market rates.

Most concerning is that the Government have no target for social rented housing. As I said earlier, Shelter’s commission on social housing estimates that 3.1 million homes need to be built in the next 20 years if we are to arrest this crisis. That is an average of 155,000 a year, which would cost only £10.7 billion per year. Just 6,500 homes were built last year, and at that rate only 130,000 would get built over the next 20 years, or just 4%.

We could afford to build those homes. According to Shelter’s report and data provided by the New Economics Foundation, we currently spend £21 billion on housing benefit annually, money that more often than not is insecure tenancies, fees scandals, rogue landlords and too little agency involvement in enforcement among local authorities.

What needs to be done? I want to see a radical reconstruction of our communities. In Tuesday’s debate, the Minister suggested that it is a complicated landscape, but I am afraid I have to disagree. We have made it complicated by yielding to market interests and failing to regulate in the interests of our people and our communities. In my view, we need to urgently reform planning, adopting a model similar to that in Germany; resurrect a regional spatial strategy, including for new towns and villages; reform compulsory purchase; scrap the nonsense that is viability, which is a scam exploited by corporate house builders; and ensure a 50% minimum of social housing on all greenfield developments and 80% on all brownfield sites in towns and cities.
We can address the funding though redirecting housing benefit to investment in the assets that come from building new homes. We should stop the sell-off of 50,000 social rented homes a year, and I urge an end to the right to buy. There are so many things we could do. I have talked about funding, and there is also the possibility of using pension funds, whether local authority pension funds or new ones, to support building homes. Birmingham and Greater Manchester are leading the way. On land, we could do so much with the public estate rather than selling it off to the highest bidder.

I am conscious of time and I know that many Opposition Members wish to speak. As I have said, we face a crisis and, to paraphrase Macmillan, the housing market has never been so broken. Homelessness is now 277,000 and 1.1 million are on housing waiting lists, while rough sleeping has risen 165% since 2010. The Government could, and should, deliver 3.1 million social homes over the next 20 years. It is an explicit target of 155,000 social rented homes a year and it is critical that we focus minds on delivering it. That is what my motion seeks to do. Without it, the housing crisis will only get worse.

1.9 pm

Sir David Amess (Southend West) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member for Warwick and Leamington (Matt Western) on securing this debate. I share his disappointment about the attendance, which I will come to in a moment. If I may flatter him, he has not been a Member for too long, but he has, at an early stage, realised that we cannot influence and change everything. He has decided to focus on housing, which I would have thought was the No. 1 issue for all Members, because we do not want any more people sleeping on the pavement.

I hope this does not upset colleagues, but when she visited No. 10 Downing Street, Mother Teresa asked Baroness Thatcher, "What are people doing on the pavement?". This is not a new phenomenon. I know it seems like it, but I have reached a stage where I have heard many of these things before.

I can understand the excitement, certainly in my party, at the result that has just been declared upstairs, but Parliament is not working well and I am increasingly worried. If the country and Parliament are split, we have to accept it and get on with the work. I want to see Parliament functioning. My colleagues may have decided that no one is interested any more in speeches made on the pavement.

I applaud the hon. Member for Warwick and Leamington for focusing on the No. 1 issue of housing. I am not at the start of my career, but I hope that my hon. Friends who are fairly new and starting their careers will come to realise that this is an important place and that speeches made here should count. I hope our wonderful Whip has taken note of that, and perhaps we might organise things a little better. Although I am delighted to have the company of one or two of my hon. Friends, I am somewhat embarrassed. The hon. Gentleman takes this issue seriously and made his presentation to the Backbench Business Committee, and I can only apologise for there not being more support for his debate.

I suppose the reason I was first elected 30 years ago is of the sale of council and corporation houses, and I will come to that a little later. I am glad the hon. Gentleman mentioned Macmillan, because my party’s election manifesto in 1951 said:

"Housing is the first of the social services. It is also one of the keys to increased productivity."

I agree with the hon. Gentleman that we should see social housing as a national investment.

I have not come here to bash my hon. Friend the Minister for Housing. I have read the Green Paper and the Labour party’s paper on these matters, and they both contain some really good points. I suppose it is naff to say that perhaps we could have some cross-party working, but if we do not have an election this year and limp on to next year something has to be done. We are all affected by housing, as we see at our surgeries and from our postbags.

The hon. Member for Kensington (Emma Dent Coad), who is here, has done a fantastic job of ensuring that Grenfell is not forgotten. I do not want to correct the shadow Leader of the House because she is a jolly nice lady, but she said that none of our 10 leadership candidates had mentioned Grenfell, which is not actually the case. I interviewed them rather grandly, and I mentioned Grenfell to each and every one of them, because we have to make sure it never happens again. I know that the hon. Member for Kensington and other members of the all-party fire safety rescue group will not shut up until we have real change.

The Government do not seem to have a national target, and the 300,000 figure that is so often mentioned is for new homes in general. I am glad that my hon. Friend the Member for Rochford and Southend East (James Duddridge) has joined us, because I represent an urban area of the Thames estuary where every single plot of land is built on. We cannot build on our parks, and we have no brownfield sites to build on, but his constituency has some space for building and he is rather keen that there should be more housing above shops on the high street. He also wants more housing between Southend and Rochford, the two areas he represents, in addition to the excellent proposals to transform the Queensway estate. Although it is not my area, I am very happy about that.

There is a bit of a row in Essex about where the new building will take place, which is why I had an Adjournment debate on it three weeks ago. I understand there is some resistance in parts of Essex, but there is no resistance in my hon. Friend’s constituency.

James Duddridge (Rochford and Southend East) (Con): My hon. Friend is entirely right in outlining my priority for building above the high street and in the area between Southend and Rochford, so long as we get the right infrastructure—the so-called outer relief road that would link Shoebury to the wonderful Southend airport and beyond. So long as we get our fair share of infrastructure funding, there is space north of Southend and on the high street, if Ministers listen on planning to facilitate that and get everything joined together.

Sir David Amess: My hon. Friend makes a jolly good point, because all colleagues present agree that we have to make sure the infrastructure is there when we build—
the schools, the transport and all those other matters. In my area there has been too much enthusiasm for building flats, and we have a parking nightmare.

With a new leader of the Conservative party and Prime Minister, hopefully Southend will become a city next year, and Leigh-on-Sea has been nominated the happiest place in the country to live, so we have all sorts of people wanting to live in our area, and we do not really have the infrastructure to support them.

I ask the Government for a little more clarity on targets. The number of houses built for social rent has fallen from 40,000 in 1997 to just 6,000 in 2017. Shelter has given all colleagues a good briefing—one of my daughters works for Shelter, which is a very good organisation—and is calling for 3.1 million new social homes over the next 20 years, which, by my calculation, as the hon. Member for Warwick and Leamington said, is 155,000 new properties every year. That is a little ambitious, but I would be very pleased if we got part of the way there.

If this Government and future Administrations are to get anywhere near that number, we must look at how we can re-energise and revitalise the construction industry to support that increase. There is much talk about Brexit, and some people say it is all terrible and that jobs are being lost in the construction industry because Poles and Bulgarians are coming over here, and all the rest of it. In that sense, we have ourselves to blame. We really need to make sure that we have the skilled workforce to build good-quality housing that does not lose heat—there are all sorts of issues to be considered.

As I have said, I was a beneficiary of the sale of council houses. When I was elected for Basildon, 40,000 properties were owned by the development corporation and the Commission for the New Towns. Of course, when Margaret decided that we should offer people the opportunity to buy, there were all sorts of restrictions on it; it depended on whether a person had lived in their property for 20 years or 30 years, and so on. I am not having a go at the Labour party, but the then Labour Members did not oppose the measure. [Interruption.] As the hon. Member for Stroud (Dr Drew) says, they did not oppose it because it was popular.

The issue about which the House should be concerned is how those capital receipts were not used, and how we did not go on with a new programme to build social houses. There are arguments about whether some councils were not running the stock well, and then things moved over to housing associations. All these things have been tried, but the point at the core of this is that we want more housing. As the hon. Member for Warwick and Leamington said, we now know that the real problem was that the construction boom of the ’50s, ’60s and ’70s was not sustained. If social house building had been maintained since the 1980s, I do not think we would be having this debate today.

Basildon was a tremendous success as a new town. I have an argument with my right hon. Friend the Member for Harlow (Robert Halfon) about which was the better new town, Basildon or Harlow. I know it was Basildon. It was designed brilliantly, and we put in the organisation. The use of compulsory purchase orders was done very well, without destroying the lives of those who, for instance, did not want to lose their little bungalows.

I support the Government in going part-way towards restoring the old scheme, which gave young people and families the opportunity to have a place to call home without facing the risk, as they do now, of a private landlord evicting them at very little notice. It was not a problem for central and local government to work together to deliver the housing stock when it was needed, but now local authorities do not have the power or confidence to build, and developers are taking an ever more rigorous approach to development. As I have said, in Southend West there is far too much building of flats.

Sarah Newton: My hon. Friend is making a powerful speech. I absolutely agree that we need to build more social and genuinely affordable homes. What he is highlighting as working so well in urban areas could also work in rural areas. We can create new, green, sustainable villages or small towns to meet the unmet housing need that he is so well articulating. I agree that this is about communities coming together with the local authority and central Government to plan beautiful places where people want to live, with green infrastructure, schools, health services and places of work—places in which we would all be proud to live.

Sir David Amess: However long the present Government last, I want them to deliver on my hon. Friend’s vision for the future, because we cannot all live in London and the south-east. Scotland has huge, beautiful areas. Perhaps we could get some more houses built there, or in the midlands or the north, and so on. These are all factors. She represents a very beautiful part of the country, but people also need jobs, which is the other conundrum we have to look at.

I congratulate the Government on the 2017 White Paper, in which they acknowledged the need to build the right homes in the right places. As well as recognising demand, that statement applied to the use of brownfield land. As roughly 95% of local planning authorities have published their surveys of available brownfield land, it should be easy to identify the areas that are ripe for development. We have to get on and do this; surely it must be easy to identify the areas. I know that the Government are looking to have planning permission in place in principle for 90% of sites by the end of next year. I would be very disappointed if there were any unnecessary encroachment on our precious greenbelt land. There we are: I am introducing a bit of nimbyism.

If we are to increase the number of social houses in this country, we need to look at how to boost house building in general. Of course, there is no one policy that will invigorate the industry, but perhaps the most important factor is having a skilled British workforce, as I have said. The Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy must work hand in hand with the Department for Education to produce those skills. My party can be proud of the number of young people attending university, but that should not be seen as devaluing the high-skilled, often manual jobs required to ensure the immediate increase in the number of social houses. Just because someone is posh and well educated, it does not make them any better as a human being than someone who works in care homes or elsewhere. It is important that we have a high-skilled workforce. [Interruption.] I will rapidly move on with my speech, Madam Deputy Speaker.
[Sir David Amess]

We need to encourage local councils to get building by removing the borrowing cap for new build properties, which has existed for too long. A Local Government Association survey found that 94% of housing stock-owning councils would use a removal of the borrowing cap to accelerate or increase their house building programmes. By 2041, the population in the south-east will have increased by over 30%, while in the north-east that figure will be below 5%. That is another factor to consider.

I should remind Opposition Members that in 2001, at the height of the Labour Government, only 60 new homes were built. That is absolutely dreadful. I could go on and on about that. I have heard all these promises before and seen not much being delivered. We must achieve a significant increase in social housing and re-examine permitted development rights. Successive Governments of all persuasions, dating back to the 1990s, have failed to support the construction of social housing. We really must change that.

In conclusion, everyone’s home is their castle—of which there can be doubt—and there are an awful lot of castles in Scotland. Social housing benefits young people, families who have struggled to get on the property ladder, elderly couples in the private sector and homeless individuals. It is our duty in this House to support the construction industry and make sure that we build more social housing.

1.26 pm

Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to take part in this debate and even more so to follow the hon. Member for Southend West (Sir David Amess). We might not agree on everything, but he always speaks with knowledge and passion about something that is close to him. We have a Southend theme in the Chamber, given that two of the four Government Back Benchers are from Southend.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Warwick and Leamington (Matt Western), who is a doughty champion of social housing, particularly council housing. It is a great honour to jointly chair the campaign with him and we have made some progress. We are pleased that the Minister is still in place, although he might have ambitions to move elsewhere. He does listen and he has acted. He has done some laudable things, in particular some of the changes to the viability assessment that are in train. I hope that he will listen to this debate and respond in due course—as he did to a number of us who spoke in Tuesday’s debate, of which this debate is part 2—on a specific aspect of the housing shortage, namely, the shortage of social housing.

I have limited time and will keep my remarks short, because other Members want to speak. I am indebted to my council in Stroud, in particular to Doina Cornell, the leader, and to Chas Townley, who chairs the housing committee, but also to the wisely named Pippa Stroud, the head of housing strategy, who deals with this problem day in, day out. I will say some things that are quite technical, and I make no apologies for that. I expect the Minister not necessarily to be able to answer them in this debate, but to take them away, to read them and then to talk to me privately or to reply in correspondence.

The biggest problem we face is that we want to build more social housing. We have a good record, for a small council. We have built 230 social units over recent years and have another 50 to 70 potentially in the planning process, some with the land already allocated. I do not want to go over the same ground as others, but as other hon. Members have said, land values are a significant problem and our biggest barrier in rural areas—I will be unapologetic in concentrating on semi-rural areas such as Stroud. The problem now is that the council has tended to max out the sites that it has available, either by reusing existing council housing that was unsuitable and therefore knocked down and replaced, or by using garage sites, which are terribly controversial. No one wants to use them for garages until someone wants to knock them down, when everyone then says that they are their most important asset. Some things become problematic when one tries to grapple with these issues.

No one has mentioned it yet, but I should advertise the Monbiot report, which Labour commissioned. People will take it to be a terribly political report, but I hope the Minister will look into it, because it contains some things that a Conservative Government could consider. We are in an era in which we are looking into how to value land properly and how to tax it and to encourage better use of it. We all have in our constituencies land that is used inappropriately that could be used for social housing.

Besides the lack of land, the biggest challenge or barrier we have is how difficult it is to bring brownfield land into use. All the subsidies have gone now, and the CPO process is so labyrinthine that most councils will avoid it or use it only as a last resort. We could do with powers to look into how to take land that is not being used appropriately into public use, not necessarily for social housing but certainly for affordable housing. Stroud is a classic case: we lose out badly where others outbid the council, and without the CPO powers we are unable to do something about that.

As I said, I wish to make some technical points about why we find it quite difficult to deliver more social housing, which I will include in the framework of affordable housing. We all know the difference between the two, but if we do not have more affordable housing, we will not get more social housing, because that is a key component.

Pippa Stroud has told me of the issue of vacant building credit. When a redevelopment is taking place, a credit is given against the floor area of the vacant building, and that element is then applied against an affordable housing element. The problem is that the way the process operates means that the affordable housing is rarely built. A good site has just come forward, but no affordable housing has been realised. That is frustrating, to put it mildly, because it should have been. If the process does not deliver affordable housing, it does not deliver social housing.

The Minister knows only too well about the viability assessment, which links in with our problem. I was pleased when in the previous debate the Minister talked about the problem we have with the local housing allowance. The Government are reviewing that issue, and I will take that at face value. It is an important issue in Stroud because it is in the same local housing area as Gloucester. Because our rents are much higher, my constituents end up having to pay more top-up. Therefore, they are often driven out of Stroud into Gloucester, or even further field.
On major sites, the current problem is that there is some incoherence in the Government's national planning policy. This is an important issue in rural areas. Although we would call many of our sites larger sites, to my colleagues in rural areas they would be seen as relatively small sites. Nevertheless, they are important. The danger with such sites is that they can yield high value to the developer, particularly if they can say they will deliver so many affordable or, dare I say it, social units, but it does not quite work out as it should. Where we have designated rural areas and there are cash contributions towards rural housing, but not on that site, we need to make sure that this is bottomed out so that the money is used appropriately. I hope the Minister will look into how we designate a site. Even in Stroud, which is a semi-rural area, there are sites that are deemed not to be rural even though we would say they are very rural. I had an argument many years ago about post offices, because what I thought were some of our most rural post offices were designated as urban, for reasons that I never understood. There are arguments about how designation works.

Penultimately, there is an issue with the rural exception site cross-subsidy, which is a way to cross-fund affordable housing using market housing on the available rural sites. The difficulty, particularly for social housing, is that once landowners are given the notion that they could possibly provide more higher-end housing, it raises their expectations and it is much more difficult to bring them back to the reality of affordable housing, let alone social housing. Will the Minister look into the rural exception site cross-subsidy, because it is important? It is not right at the moment. There is no magic formula, although I wish I could give the Minister one. His Department will need to do some research to see how it can be altered, because there are some—I will not say abuses, but some opportunities that could be realised are not being realised.

I shall finish on the right to buy, which I hope we will suspend in semi-rural areas because we have lost so much of our good housing stock. I do not know whether the Government are rethinking this issue, with housing associations. It is galling that in a matter of time the 200-odd units that we have built could be bought and go into the marketplace. The most frustrating thing of all is when they are then fed back into the private rented sector, and there are sometimes two people next-door to one another and one is paying twice as much rent as the other. If they find out what their neighbour is paying to one another and one is paying twice as much rent as the other. If they find out what their neighbour is paying to the council, those are some of the most difficult conversations I have, trying to justify that differential in the rent. We have to look into that, because it cannot be acceptable.

A lot could be done, but we are pleased that the cap has been removed, although it has not gone completely because there are obviously borrowing restrictions. We are keen to deliver social housing. We have a huge backlog of people waiting to be housed in Stroud. We can do our bit, but the Government have to help us. Otherwise, we will find that we are at the margins when we should be at the centre, dealing with our housing problem. As the hon. Member for Southend West said, it is a perennial problem, but it is acute at the moment.

1.36 pm

Siobhain McDonagh (Mitcham and Morden) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Warwick and Leamington (Matt Western) on his tireless work and campaigning on this incredibly important issue. I am sure that, as it is for me, 50% to 60% of the casework of every Member is on issues of social housing and the lack of it.

We can look back at Labour’s record and think that we could have and should have done more, but let us not take any criticism from those on the Government Benches. Under Labour, between 1997 and 2010, there were 2 million more homes, there were 1 million more homeowners and we saw the biggest investment in social housing in a generation. Fast forward to the present day and there are now 1.2 million people on housing waiting lists throughout the country. What was the Government’s response? Just 6,464 social homes in 2017-18—the second lowest total on record. At this rate, it will take 172 years to give everyone on the current waiting list a social rented home. That is simply a diabolical rate when compared with the 150,000 social homes that were delivered each year in the mid-1960s, or the 203,000 council homes delivered by the Government in 1953. The evidence is clear: it has been done before and it can be done again.

My constituency is in the London Borough of Merton—a borough that had just 255 lettings in the past year, including just 146 one-beds, 65 two-beds, 43 three-beds and, amazingly, just one four-bed. With figures like these, what hope do any of the 10,000 families on Merton’s waiting list have of ever finding a place to call home? I would be the first to criticise Merton for the level of importance it places on social housing—I do not believe the council concentrates on it enough or is innovative enough—but the Government cannot get away with just blaming Merton.

In 2010, George Osborne cut funding for social housing by more than 60%, leaving us reliant on private developers to provide social housing—the most expensive way to provide a social housing unit that could ever be dreamed up—or on housing associations developing on the basis of the new affordable rents. Surely we must all agree that it is a criminal act to the English language to use the word “affordable” in this context. I am not sure about other Members’ constituencies, but 80% of market rent is not affordable to the vast proportion of people in my constituency. This left housing associations with the dilemma: did they continue to endeavour to fulfil their historic mission to provide housing for people in need, placing themselves under the financial risk of having to charge those rents and to borrow so extensively on their assets; or did they simply give up the ghost? That was a really difficult choice to make and I criticise no housing association in that regard.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): My hon. Friend has made a very good point. Some housing associations behave well and some behave badly under those circumstances. This was not only about new build, but about the conversion of more than 110,000 existing social rented homes to affordable homes, taking them out. Was that not a deliberate policy by a succession of Conservative and coalition Governments not just to not replace social housing, but to diminish the quantity of social housing?

Siobhain McDonagh: I think that had many motives. One motive was to diminish social housing, but it had the consequence of putting housing associations at financial risk, leading to a terrible crisis and an
expensive crisis. My hon. Friend the Member for Westminster North (Ms Buck) informed us of the amount we are currently spending on housing benefit. If we reduce grant rates, we increase the rent and simply place more demand on housing benefit.

Let me give as an example a London and Quadrant development on Western Road in Mitcham. I met my constituent, Tracey. She was desperate to move for many reasons. She had got to the top of the list. I said, “Tracey, bid for this lovely new place, which has been built by L&Q on Western Road.” She said, “I would love to, Siobhain, but the problem is that my partner and I work and the rent is £1,000 a month. We simply could not pay it.” The very people for whom these properties were intended cannot afford to rent them because they go to work.

It is people’s real experiences that motivate me to be interested in this topic. It is about the hundreds of my hard-working constituents who are living in overcrowded conditions at private sector rents that leave them with little to live on and some without even enough to eat. Those families cannot afford to get on the housing ladder. There are not enough social homes to go round. For those who do make it into the private rented sector, they are always just one step away from finding themselves without a home. Not a week goes by when I do not meet yet another hard-working family who have been evicted from their privately rented property and threatened with homelessness just because the landlord can collect more rent from somebody else.

Ms A, with her two young sons, lives in a privately rented property. She pays £1,200 a month, less than the market rent. The landlord could get £2,000 a month. Her young son found his dad dead in bed. The importance of their staying in that home is paramount: so the kids can get to school; she can get to work; and they can get the support from our local church, Saint Joseph’s. She cannot afford to lose that home. When she came to see me, she said, “Siobhain, it’s in a terrible state of repair, and the landlord just told me to think myself lucky. Will you get environmental health involved?” Over the weekend, I thought about it. I know what the consequences will be if I get environmental health involved: six months later, that lady will lose her home. My alternative is to go back to my church to see whether I can find people in that church who will do some of those repairs for her.

Another lady, Miss P, has been a tenant of her privately rented home for the past 14 years. She has never owed money. She has three children and her husband has learning difficulties and a number of health problems. She has received her section 21 notice. It has expired and she faces two years in temporary accommodation. She has received her section 21 notice. It has expired and she faces two years in temporary accommodation.

At 7.30 last Friday, a lady and her 17-year-old son came to see me in a distressed state. They said they were a home from Lewisham who had been housed in Morden for the past year. They had received a phone call that day from Lewisham to say that they must leave their property next Thursday and move miles away. So the eldest son cannot continue his A levels, the middle son cannot continue his GCSEs, and the third son is going to have to move away from his school. This is a vulnerable family who are in temporary accommodation as a result of domestic violence.

Thankfully, Lewisham has changed its mind and it is leaving the family there, but how many families are uprooted, with children having to leave their school? As other hon. Members have suggested, a housing problem is an education problem, is a mental health problem, is a family breakdown problem, is a crime problem.

I am tired of the endless reports, the countless debates, the fruitless words and the lack of action. The Government have a house building target of 300,000 new homes per year, and they cannot simply keep willing the end of more homes without finding the means to provide them. So what will it be? Will we back here at the next debate offering the same ideas and hearing even worse statistics, or will this Government finally open their eyes and see the devastating reality of Britain’s 21st century housing crisis?

1.46 pm

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): First, let me congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Warwick and Leamington (Matt Western) on securing this debate and on his excellent introduction. He is right that social housing is absolutely central to what we, as politicians, are here to do. It is damning to see the empty Benches opposite—it really does send out a very poor message to the rest of the country about where our priorities are at the moment.

As most Members have already said, week in, week out, housing problems are a No.1 issue in my constituency surgeries—whether it is to do with a lack of affordable housing, poor living conditions, homelessness, or landlords simply not rectifying problems in properties. We can talk about house numbers in the hundreds of thousands, but we should not forget that at the heart of this matter are real people facing real difficulties because we have had nine years of failure. Sadly, it is no exaggeration to say that this Government have failed across the board when it comes to housing. They have failed buyers and renters alike. They have allowed the leasehold scandal to emerge, and they have failed to tackle the root cause of the problems that the sector is facing.

I am pleased that today’s debate is focusing on social housing. It is no coincidence that the steep decline that we have seen in social house building has coincided with an increase in homelessness and soaring private rents. Since this Government came to power, rents have become increasingly unaffordable, with private renters spending, on average, 41% of their household income on rent. In those circumstances, it is no wonder that more than half of private renters say that they struggle to meet their housing costs. Worse still, Shelter reports that a third of low-income renters are struggling to the extent that they have to borrow money just to keep a roof over their head. That means that putting money aside to save for a deposit so that they can eventually own their own home is completely unrealistic. A lack of social housing has put enormous pressure on the private sector, which means that a quarter of private renters, equating to more than 1 million households, rely on some element of housing benefit or universal credit to keep a roof over their head.
We have already discussed the Supreme Court judgment yesterday on the local housing allowance, which demonstrates the current injustices in the system. I know that in Neston, in my constituency, rental costs for a property are at least £150 a month more than the local housing allowance provides for. That is a totally indefensible and unsustainable situation, but what choice do people have? The decline in social housing stock has left more than 1.1 million people trapped waiting for social housing, with many of those families facing greater instability with rising rents in the private sector.

At the same time, the number of homeless families living in temporary accommodation has increased to 74% since 2010. Let us just think about that. These are young people who may be forced to move out of area, potentially affecting their schools, their family connections and their jobs. Temporary accommodation really does strike at the heart of what we are trying to build with families in this country.

Welfare reforms have made private sector landlords increasingly reluctant to let to tenants who rely on housing benefit. As we know, many landlords simply refuse to accept any tenants who are in receipt of benefits. This is a discriminatory practice, and I pay tribute to Shelter for its campaign on that. Sadly, though, it is a fact that someone who is facing homelessness is not going to look to bring a court case for discrimination; they will simply look elsewhere—if there is anywhere else to look. The reality is that landlords’ behaviour will carry on in this way, while local authorities, in an ineffective attempt to discharge their statutory duties, will continue to hand out lists of private sector landlords to those facing homelessness, but those landlords will never actually rent their properties to those people because they are in receipt of benefits.

Siobhain McDonagh: Both of my parents came to Britain from Ireland at the end of the 1940s, when there were postcards in the windows that said, “No Irish, no blacks, no dogs”. Does my hon. Friend agree that if there were such postcards today, they would just say, “No benefits”?

Justin Madders: I thank my hon. Friend for her intervention. Yes, we were familiar with the sign, “No DSS”—the one that used to apply. Letting agents, lenders and landlords all need to get the message that they are operating a potentially discriminatory policy. This really does go to the root of the difficulties we have when people are making homelessness applications. If they get a section 21 notice, that does not seem to have much effect on priority. It is almost as though there is a waiting game. Court costs, eviction notices, stress and uncertainty all have to come before any real priority is applied to people who are facing homelessness. The system is not working; it is under tremendous pressure and supply is nowhere near meeting demand.

Why do we still have the bedroom tax? Six years on, the same injustices carry on. I regularly see constituents who are still paying it and have been paying it for six years now. It is absolutely causing havoc with their finances. They are getting into debt and struggling to pay their day-to-day costs—and for what? To pay this unfair tax with money they do not have. If we have a new Prime Minister who genuinely wants to show that they are different from what has gone before, the first thing they should do is abolish the bedroom tax.

Of course, it is no coincidence that at the same time as we are facing this crisis in social housing, home ownership is also declining. Just a quarter of people born in the late 1980s to own their own home by the age of 27, compared with 33% of those who were born five years earlier, and 43% of those born earlier than that, in the late 1970s. There is a clear trend here. There is a danger that an entire generation will be locked out of home ownership, because there is no sign of the situation improving. A major part of the reason for this collapse is that house prices have grown far faster than incomes, leaving young people struggling to meet the affordability tests set by lenders. Even if they are able to save the tens of thousands of pounds needed for a deposit in the first place, it is still a struggle, because the average home in England now costs eight times more to buy than the average pay packet. There are 900,000 fewer homeowners under the age of 45 than there were in 2010. The trend is going backwards, and that is why there is so much need for more social housing.

We must build new social homes and affordable homes, both to rent and to buy, for all those who need them—yes, for the most vulnerable, but also for those in work and on ordinary incomes, for young people, for families locked out of home ownership, and for older people reaching retirement who are facing old age in insecure, unaffordable, unsuitable properties. All those people are being failed by current housing policy. We are facing a situation where, for the first time in our generation, we can expect to earn less than their parents. After decades of the number of houses being built failing to keep up with demand, we are at a crunch point where home ownership looks out of reach to an entire generation.

I am pleased to say that my local authority is taking the lead on this. Cheshire West and Chester Council has now built in Ellesmere Port the first council housing we have seen in 40 years, as part of a mixed development. I was absolutely delighted to welcome the shadow Secretary of State, my right hon. Friend the Member for Wentworth and Dearne (John Healey), to this new development only last month. I am very proud that after 40 years, we are starting that development, but due to the huge increase in right-to-buy applications, we are not even standing still. Of course I support people’s aspiration to own their own home, but the right-to-buy policy is incredibly short-sighted, because the reality is that far from there being one-for-one replacement, there is probably about one property being replaced for every four sold. I agree with the Local Government Association that this situation is completely unsustainable. The loss of social rented housing pushes more families into the private rented sector, further pushing up rents and exacerbating the housing crisis. In addition, as we have heard, some of these houses end up in the private rented sector, which again pushes up rents.

It is a gargantuan task to replenish this country’s depleted housing stock. I am pleased that after many years of stagnation, we are seeing quite a lot of house building going on in my constituency, particularly on brownfield sites, but very few of these developments have any affordable housing. That is because the permissions were all granted some time ago, and the developers used rules brought in under the coalition Government to plead poverty and tell us that they could not build affordable houses because they could not maintain their 20% profit margins. As a result, all these new houses are
being built, but on just about every private development in our constituencies hardly any affordable housing is being built. Most developers sought release from those obligations four or five years ago but have only started building in the past couple of years. It is therefore quite clear that the affordable housing was not the problem; it was about what they wanted to do to maximise their profits—it was greed. If we are going to build ourselves out of this housing crisis, we cannot continue to rely on the same avaricious developers who have got us into this mess in the first place. A cursory look at the leasehold scandal tells us everything we need to know about the priorities of some developers.

There is a massive job ahead of us, and things need to change. Enough is enough. My Front-Bench colleagues have set out a very ambitious plan about how we can achieve this. Yes, we need to build 1 million more genuinely affordable homes; yes, we need to target Help to Buy on first-time buyers on ordinary incomes; and, yes, we need to give councils the freedom to build and retain council homes for local people. But we need to get on with it now. This Parliament is broken. We look around and absolutely nothing is happening. The Government are incapable of making decisions. Every day they spend arguing among themselves is another day further away from tackling this urgent and very real crisis. This country deserves so much better.

1.56 pm

Emma Dent Coad (Kensington) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Warwick and Leamington (Matt Western) for bringing forward this debate, which has provoked really good comments across the House.

In my constituency, the council has, at last, initiated a programme of building homes for social rent. This depends on the Mayor of London’s funding pot of £33 million, for which we are very grateful, to provide 330 new homes. That will go some way towards replacing the 120 homes lost in the Grenfell Tower fire and housing 135 homeless households, as of yesterday, still waiting for permanent accommodation—those from the tower itself, those from Grenfell Walk, and those from the neighbouring walkways who cannot bear to continue to live there.

However, this is not just about numbers. Our council, I am afraid, has a poor record in providing new social rented homes. It entered into a devil’s deal with a developer partner whereby a number of homes for social rent, some intermediate and some for private rental, were built. Sadly, some were very poorly constructed.

Construction standards in many were appalling. In one new development, the drains constantly backed up into the kitchen sinks. The homes had to be evacuated while the floors were drilled out and new drains fitted. In another, dodgy drains brought rats up into the building’s first floor, where they could run unhindered as the supposed fire doors had such large gaps underneath them. This was a building that some Grenfell survivors had been moved into. The roof leaked. A ceiling collapsed. The lift broke, and a traumatised resident was stuck in it for hours. Radiators were found not actually to be attached to the central heating system. These problems continue.

In some of our new housing association mixed developments, the story is the same. In brand new buildings, roofs have leaked, ceilings have collapsed, loos and hand basins have fallen off the walls, and even a floor has collapsed. Membranes were not fitted into the external walls, so damp came straight through, causing black mould. Balconies were not fitted with drainage, so they flooded. Badly fitted cladding and window surrounds allowed rain to come in. Some basement flats flooded as door jambs were set too low. These properties, which are just three years old, are just a few examples of a common problem.

Throughout all this, the council is powerless to act. We have spoken to environmental health, building control and health and safety, and they do not have the powers of enforcement they need to make a difference. These issues are endemic across the country. We have a generation of, frankly, grotty new buildings. Many may not last 50 years, as did their predecessors that were demolished to make way for them.

The drop in construction standards is due to the total lack of strategic forward thinking. We have relied on skilled workers from abroad for so long that we forgot to train our own. Now that tens of thousands have returned—many to eastern Europe—due to Brexit anxiety, we have huge gaps in our skills, and no one is planning to invest in training for employment in the construction industry. The other issue, of course, is developer greed. They specify the cheapest possible materials to make a larger profit. I do not need to list the horrors that that can produce.

If we are to build 1 million homes, we need not only changes to the housing finance system and Government funding, but a generation of skilled workers, as the hon. Member for Southend West (Sir David Amess) said, and the building materials to create good-quality, well-built homes. Apprenticeships should be the answer, but many of them are poor quality. Some provide little training, apart from how to wield a glue gun; that is an actual case. The apprenticeship levy was a good idea but is poorly implemented. I believe that the pot has reached £1 billion, but contributing and receiving companies tell me that they do not have time to push through the complex bureaucracy, nor do many of them have the capacity to give good training, with all the best intentions. We must train our young people.

A specific Kensington-based problem is that of luxury developments left empty, which forces up the cost of everything, including social housing, and makes it even more difficult to build the homes we need for everybody. Many luxury homes, we suspect, are bought to launder money. We must force beneficial owners to register their names and, we hope, will disincentivise the drug lords, people traffickers and other vermin who want to dump their dirty money in my constituency.

I will give an example of a luxury development with empty flats. On Kensington Road, almost opposite Kensington Palace, there was a 700-bed Victorian hotel, of Italianate design, in a perfectly good state. It was quite an interesting building. It was bought up by Candy and Candy, which flattened the site and was given permission by our fabulous council to build a
luxury development of 97 flats. I pass that building regularly, and only four of the lights are ever on. Imagining that the flats had all been bought and left empty, I spoke to the staff, who said that some of them had not even been sold after four years but were being kept off the market to keep the price up. I find that absolutely obscene.

As we begin commemorations tonight on the second anniversary of the atrocity of the Grenfell Tower fire in my neighbourhood, it cannot be clearer that we need to create a new generation of social rented homes, with stable tenancies, of good quality, where families can fulfil their dreams, increase productivity and reach their full potential in security and safety.

2.3 pm

**Sandy Martin** (Ipswich) (Lab): I would like to thank and congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Warwick and Leamington (Matt Western) on securing this crucial debate. Housing is possibly the second most important issue facing this country at the moment after climate change, and it is one that affects the majority of the population—some of them very badly indeed.

In Ipswich, we had 175 people accepted as unintentionally homeless and in priority need last year. We also had 42 accepted as intentionally homeless. I despise the idea that anybody should be categorised as intentionally homeless. They may have made bad decisions in their lives that led to them becoming homeless, but the vast majority had no intention of being homeless, and they do not want to sleep on the streets or on friends’ floors. They are not intentionally homeless, and I would like to see that category abolished altogether. We also had 12 people categorised as homeless but not in priority. That just goes to show the size of the problem involved, when people who are recognised as being homeless are not considered priority cases simply because there are so many cases that are of a higher priority.

The number of homeless acceptances in Ipswich is significantly higher than the national average and, indeed, the regional average. That is partly because people intentionally move into Ipswich because they are more likely to be housed. Any Member who represents a rural constituency and is honest with themselves will know that someone who is homeless in a rural constituency is more likely to be housed if they move into an urban constituency.

I am very proud of Ipswich Borough Council’s efforts to deal with this problem. Seventeen new council houses are receiving their topping out tomorrow morning in my constituency. We have 60 new council homes under construction on another site, and we have 16 new council homes about to be started on a third site. We have a 45-person temporary housing unit nearing completion, which will be taking homeless families directly out of so-called bed and breakfasts from next month.

I have been round one of these so-called bed-and-breakfast hostels where homeless people have to be placed. I was told to leave—I was ordered out of the premises by a member of staff after I had been there for about an hour, because I had been smuggled in by one of my constituents. My constituents told me, “You won’t be allowed to visit; we’re not allowed to have any visitors.” I said, “Well, I am the Member of Parliament,” and they said, “That doesn’t make any difference.

The owners of this place will keep anybody out—councillors, Members of Parliament or whoever.” It is a place to live, but my goodness, it is not somewhere we would want anybody that we knew to live. We need to ensure that when people are homeless, there is somewhere for them to go straightaway, and so-called bed and breakfasts are not the answer.

Since we took back control of the council in 2011, 269 social rented homes have been built in Ipswich, and about half of them have been built by the council. I was proud to take my right hon. Friend the Member for Wentworth and Dearne (John Healey) around the largest of those estates two years ago. I note that my predecessor took the right hon. Member for West Dorset (Sir Oliver Letwin) around the same estate, despite the fact that it was built by a Labour council, and despite the vituperative opposition from Conservative councillors at the time and the opposition of that self-same predecessor to the development.

In that case, we were able to build the council estate, I am glad to say, and it was entirely for social rent, but my predecessor’s opposition was not always ineffective. A development of 94 new council homes at the 1,300-home Ravenswood estate was blocked. It had gone through planning application and appeal, but my predecessor went to the Conservative Secretary of State and persuaded him to block the building of the 94 council homes, on the grounds that 20 of them should be shared ownership. Some £300,000 of council money was wasted on the abortive preparation work, and £1.5 million of Homes and Communities Agency funding was lost to my constituency as a result of my predecessor’s direct intervention.

There have been not just historical blocks on the building of council housing: there was an attempt to block the 60-home estate that we have under construction on the grounds that it was all going to be social housing. The only way to ensure that we could continue with that development and be allowed to build the social rented housing was to set up an arm’s length company to offer some of the exact same homes at higher, so-called affordable rents. The local Conservatives even tried to block the homeless families unit that we are finishing next month.

Yes, we need far more financial resources, we need a more skilled workforce and we need more freedoms for local authorities to build those council houses, but we also need the Government to dismantle the intentional hurdles that are still there. Yes, I am very pleased that the cap has been removed, but the Government need to drop their ideological opposition to council housing—not just here in Parliament, but among their councillors. It is not good enough just to have the right words; we also need to see deeds.

This is not about planning permissions. The private sector has hundreds of outstanding planning permissions for flats and houses in Ipswich, but it prefers to build detached, executive homes on greenfield sites in rural areas because it can make more profit that way. Only council housing will reduce homelessness and reduce rates in the private sector by reducing the massive additional demand over and above supply. It will increase the stock of housing for sale by reducing the incentive for buy to let. It will provide the houses that people need, and the people who need them the most will be the most likely to have them provided as local authority housing.
The private sector has not built the homes we need. The experiment to bring an end to local authority housing and to put everything into the private sector, started by Margaret Thatcher in 1979, has failed. It is time to accept that, and it is time to do what we know works.

2.11 pm

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): May I add my thanks to my hon. Friends the Members for Warwick and Leamington (Matt Western), and for Stroud (Dr Drew)—the real midlands engine behind this debate? The fact that we have had speeches from Members from around the country shows that this is a national crisis. The problems are different, but housing supply goes to the heart of them.

In high-value land areas such as my constituency, the problem is particularly intense. House prices are more than 20 times earnings, and the average rent of all properties is more than £2,000 a month. The lowest quartile of house prices, which are the properties we would perhaps expect people on low incomes to be able to afford, reaches well over £500,000. Indeed, the only type of accommodation that is affordable to anybody on the London living wage, let alone the minimum wage, is social rented housing. That is why I am very pleased we are having a debate specifically on this issue. Yes, we need a greater supply of many different types of housing, including in the private rented sector, of good quality and at affordable rents, and we obviously need owner occupation, but the real crisis that has developed over the last 30 or 40 years is in the supply of affordable housing.

I do not want to talk too much about statistics, but there are two or three that I find particularly pregnant. One is the 165% increase in rough sleeping since 2010. There is no good reason for that to have happened, other than Government policy and neglect. Another is the number of social rented homes being built. I think the number was about 6,500 in the year for which figures are most recently available, compared with 40,000 in the last year of the previous Labour Government, but in the decades after the war, the figure was regularly 120,000 a year, year after year. Those disparities show exactly why it is no surprise that we have a crisis.

I would add another statistic. It is slightly more esoteric, but it is an indication of how Government policy has gone off the rails. The London Assembly member Tom Copley did a very good report recently on permitted development—in other words, the conversion, without the requirement for planning consents, of office blocks to residential accommodation, or the slums of the future, as they are now being called. I suppose a silver lining to that cloud is that none of those will actually be social housing slums, because not one of those properties is likely to be a social home. Of the 300 converted in Hammersmith since the policy changed five or six years ago, not one will be a social rented home.

That is one method by which the Government ensure that social housing is always the poor relation, and is never delivered. It is why, rather than talk about the statistics, I will talk in the few minutes I have about the politics. Unless we confront the political differences between the two parties, we will not deliver on social housing. There are obviously big differences on other areas of public policy—the NHS, education and so forth—but there is deeply ingrained in the post-Thatcher era Conservative party an antipathy to and a manipulation of social housing, which has ensured that it has declined over those 40 years.

It is interesting that we now hear Conservative politicians—I do not know whether these are the beginnings of an apology—talking about the stigma of social housing. I have never felt that there was any stigma attached to social housing. That may be because it accounts for a third of my constituency, so it is prevalent. It may also be because it is absolutely in demand, because of its affordability. There has not been such a thing as a hard-to-let property in Hammersmith since the 1970s, and there are long waiting lists for any particular type of home. That is also because, as in the case of many London boroughs—I do not know about the situation outside London—a large proportion of our stock is what are called acquired properties. These are on-street properties that are now very valuable—Victorian and Edwardian houses that were bought up when they were cheap in the 1970s and 1980s—and they are giving life to the mixed communities that we enjoy in London, and which have been imperilled, as I say, by Conservative Government policies.

We heard the hon. Member for Southend West (Sir David Amess) refer to the policies of the Thatcher Government and the right-to-buy policy. However, if that had been just about home ownership—about enabling people to buy their home, which is a popular and perfectly justifiable policy—we would have had the replacement of those homes. The demand for social housing did not suddenly go away overnight in 1980s; it continued. However, that replacement has never happened, and it does not happen now. Even now, despite a lot of attention being drawn to the issue, only two social homes are replaced for every five that are sold off.

The policy was actually about politics and social engineering. It was about trying to outwit the Labour party through what was perceived to be a part of its own electorate, by saying to people, “We will give you a very valuable asset for way below the value of it”, and that is perhaps why in Basildon it became popular on all sides. The policy was about something else as well. It was about saying—going back to the point about stigma—“You can do better than that,” and, by implication, “If you don’t buy your own home, but stay in a council house or housing association property, there must be something wrong with you.” The policy was taken up and developed in a more and more aggressive way, particularly in London, by Conservative politicians in the 1980s and 1990s.

I am thinking of the era of Shirley Porter—that was about straight political advantage as well, but it was not just about that—and about what Wandsworth Council did, as well as what was later done with my own council houses and those in Fulham. These cases are prime exponents of how to manipulate what should be the most important asset in people’s lives for political, social and, in some cases, moral purposes. People were told that council housing created a dependency culture, and that people should be paying market rents. As my hon. Friend the Member for Westminster North (Ms Buck) said in an intervention, we saw that extraordinary and
damaging shift from subsidising land and building to subsidising private landlords, primarily through the extraordinary increase in housing benefit, with billions of pounds every year being wasted in that way.

There is a document that I often refer to, and will go on referring to until it is better known. It was written about 10 years ago by the then Conservative leader of Hammersmith and Fulham Council, and it had wide currency and gained a lot of favour with the coalition Government. In effect, it proposed the end of council housing based on four principles. The first was that we should have near-market rents, and not have below-market rents. The second was that we should have no subsidy to allow the building of social housing. The third was that there should be no security—no more lifetime tenancies, only fixed-term tenancies that were renewable. Finally, there should be no legal duty on local authorities to rehouse people, as there is under the Housing (Homeless Persons) Act 1977 for those who fall into vulnerable categories.

The explicit aim was to reduce over time the volume of social housing to about 5% to 10% of what it currently is. That may sound like fantasy, but three and a half of those four principles were quickly adopted by the coalition Government, and we have seen the effect of that in the 10 years since then. There are now affordable rents that are 80% of market rents, and short-term tenancies that mean that families grow up in insecurity, not with a home, but with temporary accommodation for that period.

The cut in subsidies that my hon. Friend the Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh) referred to cut away at the stroke the ability of councils to build new homes, and led to the massive decline that has been mentioned. We did not quite get no duty towards homeless people, but we got a duty that could be discharged in the private rented sector. The effect of benefit cuts and other measures introduced by the coalition Government was that people were placed in temporary accommodation or in the private rented sector and were often—because of the cost of renting in high-value areas—sent a long way from home. Those policies may have been dreamed up in policy forums in west London, but they got the ear of the then Minister of State for Housing and Planning, now Chairman of the Conservative party, and quickly became policy, and that has led to the parlous situation that we are in.

Let me be a little more specific and concrete by describing what happened in my area when there was a change of political control. We had eight years of the Conservatives running Hammersmith. Social housing was not only a low priority, but was sold off as it became vacant. More than 300 council homes, which tended to be the larger, more expensive three and four-bedroom street properties, were sold off, so that they were no longer available to rehouse people. In most cases, there was no requirement on developers to provide any social housing. There was a policy not to build any more, and to reduce the quantity of social housing in an area that had more than 10,000 people on the housing waiting list—a problem that was resolved by abolishing the housing waiting list.

Let me contrast that with the current situation in Hammersmith under a Labour council whose first and clearest priority is to resolve those problems, and whose second priority is to provide decent-quality, affordable social housing for a new generation. In partnership, it is building 440 new affordable homes, with the possibility of another 300 on top of that. Through development deals, and as a result of the council pushing developers hard to ensure that a large proportion of new housing is affordable, there could be another nearly 2,400 homes.

Over the current four-year planning period, we expect more than 3,000 new affordable homes to be built in a borough that has some of the highest land prices in the country. At least a quarter of those will be new social homes—the first to be constructed for many years in the borough.

That development will make a profound difference to the lives of my constituents. The difference between living in insanitary, overcrowded and insecure housing, and having a proper, secure, assured tenancy of a property that is well constructed and maintained, cannot be overestimated. That should be a priority for this Government, but it simply has not been a priority for Conservative—and indeed Liberal Democrat—Governments over the past few years.

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): The hon. Gentleman's point about safe, decent housing goes to the heart of the concerns of my constituents in Deans South. Decades ago, they were sold substandard housing by West Lothian Council, and many of them have had to live there for many years. They include a constituent who has bronchial issues, as does her son. We are close to a resolution, but it will take the will of the council, the developer, social housing, and local politicians. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that when there is an opportunity to right the wrongs of the past, we should work across the political divide and do everything we can to do that?

Andy Slaughter: I agree, and it is good to hear that message coming from different parties, regions and countries. I hope that we will also hear it from Conservative Members. Hon. Members might have gathered that I am not entirely persuaded of the bona fides of the Conservative and Unionist party on this matter, but if it genuinely wishes to change its spots there is now an opportunity to do that. That must, however, involve a large-scale building programme of social housing in this country. Frankly, I do not see that aim among the current incumbents responsible for the job, but I would be delighted to be proved wrong.

Even in the past few years, the Housing and Planning Act 2016 attempted to allow the sale of housing association homes; I am glad that attempt has been abandoned. The prospect of means-testing for council tenants created more insecurity and led to the treatment of social housing as second-class housing. That idea has also been abandoned. We have seen a change in recent years, in that the Government are less willing to take up extreme right-wing and radical policies, but we have not seen any alternative. I am sure that when the Minister responds to the debate, he will have statistics prepared by his civil servants, but such statistics never persuade anybody. We will believe there is a commitment to social housing when the Government start to build it, enabling and motivating local authorities and housing associations to build houses at an affordable rent. Without that, everything else is rhetoric.
2.27 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the hon. Member for Warwick and Leamington (Matt Western) and for Stroud (Dr Drew) for securing this debate. We can perhaps take it for granted that other things are currently occupying hon. Members and we would otherwise have a better turnout of people wishing to contribute to the debate. We have to be fair to everyone, wherever they are.

For me, there are two facets to this issue: homes to buy and rent, and social housing provision. Although Northern Ireland has a different set up for the allocation of social housing, the difficulties are the same. I wish to bring a Northern Ireland perspective to this debate, even if the Minister has no responsibility whatsoever for social housing in Northern Ireland—if only he did, we might be able to do some things.

Housing is a major issue in my constituency. Benefits might be pushing it at this moment in time, but housing continues to be the No. 1 priority. The Minister has been generous with his time, and in making himself available for meetings and discussions that we have asked for. I know he has a deep interest in his ministerial responsibility and takes it seriously. He is committed to addressing the problems and, like everyone else, we look to him for a satisfactory, positive and capable response.

When a young couple decide to marry and move in together that is a time for celebration, but such celebrations are short lived when we realise that the choices for first-time buyers and even renters are severely limited. As soon as a couple without children declare that they both work, there goes any chance of a social housing allocation—that has happened in many cases that I have been involved with—because there are simply not enough social housing projects in the works to meet the need. In my own borough council area of Ards and North Down, on 20 March 2018, there were 36,198 applicants on the social housing waiting list. Of those, 24,148 were in housing stress, which means that they needed housing quickly. In 2017-18, 11,877 households were accepted as statutorily homeless. The Northern Ireland Housing Executive does not build houses in Northern Ireland, although it did in the past. Housing associations now build them and we have had a number of social housing build projects in my constituency, which have certainly helped, but the fact of the matter is that we need to encourage more.

People will often say, “Well, you can rent privately.” Again, these figures will probably not correspond with those in other Members’ constituencies, because the rental system is different, but the median weekly rent for social housing is £77 a week for Housing Executive houses. The median weekly private rent is £98 a week. For those not working, the Government no longer make up the difference. For those who are working and are not in receipt of housing benefit, an extra £100 a month is hard to come by when statistics show that the Northern Ireland average disposable income is a fifth less than the UK average.

The issues for those seeking housing in Northern Ireland are critical. The fact is that we are not building enough homes to affordably rent and, due to price hikes, not many developers can afford to lower prices to social housing prices either. I believe we need to do more. I say that conscious of the fact that in Northern Ireland we need to do more, too. We need to build more to meet the need that is out there.

In Westminster Hall yesterday, I spoke on domestic violence and homelessness. Some people remain in abusive relationships because they fear that they have nowhere to go. If there was housing stock to go into, that fear would not hold people back from coming out of the cycle of abuse. The problem illustrated in yesterday’s debate is clear: if you are in a cycle of domestic abuse, getting other accommodation is extremely difficult.

The Crisis briefing provided for this debate highlighted the case in England. I believe the underlying issues are replicated in Northern Ireland. In 2017-18, fewer than 7,000 new homes were provided for social rent. Although that is a slight improvement on the post-war low of 5,900 social homes built, it is far lower than the recent peak of 40,000 in 2011 and the previous peak of 57,000 houses in 1992-93. In the three decades following the second world war, councils routinely built more than 100,000 homes a year for social rent. If we had those days back, I think the issue of those who need to rent would be addressed. We need to allocate more funding to build affordable homes to buy or rent. That would mean they could scrape together a deposit for a home. With the average income not allowing people to rent and save at the same time, we are seeing people stuck in a renting cycle, paying someone else’s mortgage and improving their home.

I recently worked on a private rent case, which is an example of the story I am trying to tell. The landlord put the house up for sale after his rental tenant of seven years had put in a new kitchen at her own cost. That is disgraceful, but it does happen. This single mother saved for years to fit the kitchen, yet she will never get the benefit of it. It is shocking that that should happen. It is little wonder that The Irish News reports:

“Over a third of 20-34-year-olds in Northern Ireland have yet to permanently move out, compared with around a quarter in GB...Over 36 per cent of people acquiring their home through Co-Ownership have children. According to the recent report from the Intergenerational Commission, millennials are half as likely to own their own home by the age of 30 as the baby boomer generation were at the same age.”

My second son Ian and his wife—they were married just over a year ago—bought a co-ownership home in Newtownards. Co-ownership homes provide a great opportunity for those who want to own a home but cannot pay the whole mortgage. It is 50% buy and 50% rental, but it does get them on the housing register. It gives them that opportunity, so I commend co-ownership.

To return to the quote from The Irish News relating to 20 to 34-year-olds in Northern Ireland, this is not from a lack of work or saving ethic, or a flamboyant lifestyle; this is to do with the fact that in early 2018 average pay was still £15 a week lower in real terms compared with 2008. It is harder for people and we are not making it easier for them by allowing them to do what so many in my generation did and get a wee council house that they then buy at a reduced price when they are able to afford it.

I am very fond of my colleagues on the Labour Benches and they know it. We get on well on many, many issues, but I support the right to buy. I always have supported it in my constituency, because I can see the benefits of it. I understand that things are different for some other
constituencies, but I support the right to buy scheme. In Northern Ireland, we have restrictions—not all properties are available to buy. For instance, you cannot buy bungalows, because there is a dearth of bungalows. You can buy flats and houses, but you cannot buy bungalows.

We have a generation who are now expected to do it all. They pay for broadband at £40 a month, which is not a luxury but a necessity when banks and shops are closing their high street presence in favour of the low-cost web. They either pay astronomical car insurance and petrol or pay up to £60 a week for the train and bus to work. They might allow themselves a social trip to the cinema, which in my day—I am not sure if you are in the same age bracket as me, Madam Deputy Speaker; I think you are probably not—cost £3 for two tickets. That is a long time ago: the tickets now cost over £15! How do we expect them to have a quality of life which is taken for granted by so many of us in here and still have the ability to have a home?

We must make housing stock a priority across the UK. I think the Minister is committed to that; that is my feeling from my discussions with him. I say that honestly. I believe he has the opportunity to prove himself. That is what he has said he will do. It must be affordable to rent or buy, and to do that we need a more effective strategy than the one we currently have. That is why I have no difficulty in supporting the motion tabled by my colleagues on the Opposition Benches.

From the beginning, when I first became an elected representative many, many years ago, originally on Ards and North Down Borough Council and then in the Northern Ireland Assembly, the biggest issue has always been housing. It continues to be a big issue. Generations of hard-working people are crying out for the right to be safe and secure in a home. We need to do more to provide that for the so-called lower and middle-class people who are the backbone of this country.

2.37 pm

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate. I thank the Backbench Business Committee for helping to secure it and I congratulate the hon. Member for Warwick and Leamington (Matt Western) on leading it. He made an excellent opening speech, which covered all the key issues in the motion. I agree with his comments, and those of other Members, that it would have been nice if there had been more Members in the Chamber, but it has probably led to better contributions because people have not had a time limit imposed on them. In one way, it has allowed the matter to be explored in greater detail.

I liked the way the hon. Gentleman illustrated the post-war housing policies versus the modern Tory housing policies. I agree with the sentiment about the cry for investment, clear targets, brownfield development and ending right to buy. These are matters I intend to return to.

We have heard some excellent speeches from the Back Benches. The themes seem to be homelessness, quality of existing stock, affordability, the critical matter of the lack of existing stock, and waiting lists.

For too long, since the Housing Act 1980 which allowed the right to buy, social and council housing has been the poor relation of housing aspirations. The hon. Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter) mentioned a stigma that is sometimes attached to social housing. Clearly, people owning homes is not a bad thing, but the rules for the original right to buy have led to the current crisis in social housing, with homes being sold at a discount, the receipts bypassing councils and going to Westminster, and councils not being allowed to fund or build new council housing stock. It did not take a genius to see that it would lead to a housing crisis.

Since the original sell-offs, 40% of flats sold in England under right to buy have entered the buy-to-let market, pushing up private rents, increasing the housing benefit bill and costing the taxpayer. To balance that extra cost to the taxpayer, local housing allowances have been frozen, as we have heard today, which has put pressure on social housing stock and resulted in homelessness as people cannot afford to live in the private rented sector.

In addition to the failed right to buy legacy, we had further disastrous policy decisions by the Lib Dem-Tory coalition Government and the 2015 Tory Government. The bedroom tax—not only unjust but proven to be illegal in some of its applications—has led to increased personal debt and rent arrears, the cost of which has been borne in the social sector by other rent payers and local tax payers. It just shifts a central Government cut on to local tax payers. Furthermore, the local housing allowance cap was to apply to refuge accommodation, which would have caused that vital support sector to collapse, had it not been for the belated but welcome U-turn.

Universal credit has caused issues wherever it has been rolled out—the five-week delay, massive rent arrears—and this has had an impact on social and council housing stock in terms of the ability to maintain properties and build new ones. Meanwhile, in England and Wales, the 1% year-on-year rent discount in the social rented sector, which the Tory Government have forced through, is applying downwards pressure on the revenue available to look after the stock. And now we have the ongoing voluntary right to buy pilot for social homes. If this is fully rolled out, the sales projected will result in a £10 billion discount in the sell-off of stock, which means £10 billion effectively going to subsidise people to buy houses and being taken out of the investment revenue available.

Another negative policy has been the disastrous reinvigorated right to buy scheme introduced in 2012. Since then, approximately 76,000 houses have been sold, but there have been only 20,000 new starts or acquisitions. Not only are the UK Government miles from meeting their one-for-one replacement target over three years, but the gap is widening every year to the tune of about 7,000 houses. Worse, the replacement figures are based on new starts or acquisitions; we do not monitor completions or when houses become available for people to move into. It is almost a wheeze. I am pretty sure that someone could get a JCB, dig a hole in the ground for a 20-house development and show they had started 20 new houses. On paper, they would have met the new start criteria, but the important thing is: when will these houses be available for people to move into?

Under the one-for-one replacement target, the new houses need not be of the same type or built in the same location. This is clearly another failing policy putting further pressure on the social housing sector. It does not matter what the Minister says; it demonstrates that
housing policies are still flawed. It also shows that replacement is not just a numbers game; there is much more to it. The motion mentions the number of houses that need to be constructed, but we need houses of the right type, in the right location and with access to local services and public transport, and to do that a mass of planning is required. Indeed, several hon. Members have mentioned the importance of planning.

Prior to entering the House, I served as a local councillor and was lucky enough to have housing as part of my cabinet portfolio. I was glad to instigate plans to convert low-demand flats into family homes, for which there was a much greater need and much greater demand. In conjunction with the SNP Government, East Ayrshire Council implemented a council housing build programme to build new homes, including houses that were suitable for the elderly or adapted for wheelchair use. People are often trapped in houses not suitable for them, so building new suitable housing can change people’s lives and free up larger properties for families who need them. If thought out properly, that is a clever way of refreshing the housing stock, and there is a spin-off as well: it reduces delayed discharges from hospitals, which is another important aspect.

Moreover, in East Ayrshire, as elsewhere in Scotland, part of the new council and social housing build policy is aimed at brownfield developments. The council is building new houses, creating new assets, freeing up properties for families and building proper houses while actually regenerating areas, which brings further drive and growth in the area.

All that shows that the picture can be different from the issues we have heard about today. There are ways forward and this can be solved, as the examples from East Ayrshire show. There it has been done in conjunction with the Scottish Government. Not only are they building new houses—this relates to some of the asks of hon. Members today—but they have ended the right to buy policy and so retained an additional 15,000 houses in stock. They also started a council house build programme in April 2009. It was the first council house build programme in a generation. Between 2007 and 2018, the supply of affordable homes in Scotland was 35% higher than in England and, in the last four years, that rate has been 50% higher.

In the same four-year period, the Scottish Government have delivered five times more social housing per head than England. We have built more council houses in Scotland than have been built in the entirety of England over the period of the SNP Government. That has been based on centrally funded money from the SNP, along with some local housing revenue money, not on the sell-off of existing council house stock. In Scotland, we are doing this despite Tory austerity and despite having to offset the bedroom tax, the council tax relief and LHA reductions, which obviously has put further pressure on the Scottish Government’s budget and local budgets. In Scotland, we also have stronger legislation to protect homeless people and give them the right to housing.

We have heard some excellent contributions from across the Chamber today. I hope that some of the examples I have given show that going forward with drive and ambition we can build more houses, make them fit for purpose and regenerate areas. In that area, the Scottish Government have been leading the way.

Sarah Jones (Croydon Central) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Warwick and Leamington (Matt Western) on securing this debate on the housing crisis. I also congratulate him and my hon. Friend the Member for Stroud (Dr Drew) on the council housing campaign they have led together. We have had some glorious contributions from the usual suspects today—we need a better term for the usual suspects, don’t we? We need to brand them better, but the expertise and knowledge in the House has been well worth hearing.

As has been said across the House, the focus is not in this Chamber. The focus of the media is outside, where the latest Conservative party vanity project is playing out and sucking the life out of this place. We are all on hold. We have no meaningful legislation to debate, no progress on Brexit and no substantial action on all the big issues facing people across the country. Even the Minister reportedly admitted that the Government were not focused on housing—at Brexit, he said, the Government would turn to housing. How long will that take? And in the meantime, what do we have? A lot of consultations and a lack of action.

It is two years tomorrow since 72 people—the vast majority were social housing tenants—died in the Grenfell Tower fire. We know that the fire was avoidable, but Inside Housing has today exposed, to my horror, the multiple times that members of the all-party group on fire safety and rescue, some of whom are present, pressed, pressed and pressed again for Ministers to strengthen fire safety regulations in the wake of the multiple fatalities at the Lakanal House fire.

In 2014, the APPG wrote to previous Minister, Stephen Williams. Following more letters, the Minister said that he was “not willing to disrupt the work of this department by asking that these matters be brought forward”.

In November 2015, the next Housing Minister, James Wharton, promised that he would make an announcement shortly. By September 2016, a year later, there was still no announcement, so the APPG wrote again to the next Housing Minister, Gavin Barwell. It wrote again to chase that letter in October and November 2016, following a parliamentary question in which the Minister had said that “we have publicly committed ourselves to reviewing part B following the Lakanal House fire.”—[Official Report, 24 October 2016; Vol. 616, c. 16.]

That Minister refused a meeting with the APPG and claimed that other letters had gone awry.

In November 2016 the APPG wrote again, raising a tower block fire earlier that year in which a pregnant woman had died. In February 2017, it wrote again, having not received a reply, pressing for a date for the promised review. In April 2017, the Minister replied, suggesting again that correspondence had been lost. The APPG wrote again, pointing out that it was 11 years since part B of the building regulations was last reviewed and that it had been promised action by three successive Ministers since 2010. In May 2017, the Government replied, brushing off concerns about the fire in which the pregnant woman had died. Finally, on 19 May 2017, the APPG sent another letter pressing for action. That letter was sent only a month before the Grenfell Tower fire.
In all, the APPG wrote to Ministers 21 times. It is hard to know what to say. The changes that the APPG was calling for have still not been implemented. The Secretary of State said last week the Government was committed to implementing wholesale reform of our system of fire safety and building control would not be brought forward until the next parliamentary Session. The culture of indifference stopped action before Grenfell, and two years on, we see the same pattern.

My direct plea to the Minister today is to speed up the action. I know that he has consulted on approved document B and launched a consultation on Hackitt, and that the Government have said that they will pay for the removal of flammable cladding, but two years on from the fire, the fundamentals of the system remain unchanged. Flammable cladding remains on blocks, approved document B remains unchanged and the accountabilities in the system have also not changed. That is simply not good enough.

Turning to the wider crisis in our affordable housing supply, we have heard so eloquently today about the scale of the housing crisis, which spans beyond the issue of social housing, although that is without doubt the vital building block in creating a housing market that works for everyone, not just the few. My hon. Friend the Member for Warwick and Leamington set out the context of the housing crisis and the history of council house building, with the big boost to building that we saw after the second world war. My hon. Friend the Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhan McDonagh) told us very powerful stories about what that means for people in today’s situation, where we do not have the house building that we once saw.

Over the last nine years, not only have the Government failed to tackle the gap between social housing supply and demand, but their policies are turning the gap into a gulf. Research from the National Housing Federation and the homelessness charity Crisis shows that England needs to build 145,000 affordable homes a year for the next 12 years. As we have heard, Shelter has put the figure at 3.1 million social rent homes over 20 years, but the last two years have seen the lowest level of social rent homes built since world war two. Only 6,500 were built last year, which is a fall of over 80% since the last year of the last Labour Government. The number of new homes built for affordable home ownership has almost halved since the time of the last Labour Government to less than 13,000 homes last year.

It is not hard to see why house building numbers have plummeted under this Government. Real-terms Government funding for new affordable homes has been cut by around 90%—it was less than £500 million last year compared with over £4 billion in the last year of the last Labour Government. The funding is nowhere near enough to deliver the scale of homes that we need, particularly because while the Government have failed at building, they have proved successful at selling off our existing social housing stock.

As we have heard, the Government promised a one-for-one replacement of homes sold under right to buy, but in reality, we are seeing one home built for every four sold. Over the past five years, under the scheme, councils have lost enough homes to house the population of Oxford. Councils do not even get to keep the profits from the sales; two-thirds of the receipts are sent to central Government. Meanwhile, as hon. Members have so eloquently said, the term “affordable” has been tested to the limit and beyond, including homes that are at 80% of market rents. Since 2012, over 111,000 genuinely affordable homes for social rent have been converted to those not so affordable “affordable” homes.

As the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) said, we simply do not have enough social housing. As a result, over 1 million households are on the council waiting list, and if house building carried on at the current rate, it would take 172 years to get those people the homes that they need. Last year, 18,000 fewer social lets were made to homeless households than a decade before. Rough sleeping has doubled. There are 120,000 children in temporary accommodation—my hon. Friend the Member for Ipswich (Sandy Martin) told us about the quality of that accommodation. There are more families pushed into more expensive, less secure, worse-quality private rented homes; a million more households paying private rents, which have skyrocketed by an average of getting on for £2,000 a year since 2010; and thousands still paying the bedroom tax, as my hon. Friend the Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders) pointed out.

The impact of all this is not just felt by individuals, because Government finances are being hit, too. The housing benefit bill, going straight into landlords’ pockets, has more than doubled since the early 2000s. Spending on temporary accommodation increased by 39% between 2011 and 2016—my hon. Friend the Member for Westminster North (Ms Buck) pointed that out so well. It is an utterly false economy of spending—£22 billion a year on housing benefit rather than investment in the bricks and mortar that would keep an asset in the ownership of the state, to be enjoyed by everybody at a lower cost. Of the children living in poverty, 1.3 million live in private rented accommodation. We could lift a lot of those children out of poverty if they were in council housing. We have our priorities completely the wrong way round and it is a waste of Government funding.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Mitcham and Morden said, Labour’s record, although not always perfect, was clear: 2 million more homes, a million more home owners, and the biggest investment in social housing in a generation.

The next Labour Government’s plans for social housing are more ambitious. We want to build a million genuinely affordable homes over 10 years, including the biggest council house building programme of nearly 40 years. Crucially, we will stop the haemorrhaging of our stock by suspending the right to buy. Labour long called for the lifting of the cap, and we are glad that the Government have finally listened, but that alone will not work, especially for the 205 councils that no longer own any housing stock—they will be unable to use their new borrowing powers.

Labour will back councils to set up new housing revenue accounts. We will make long-term funding available so that councils have the certainty to properly invest in social housing. Along with the money, councils and housing associations will have new powers and flexibilities to build again at scale. We would end the Conservatives’ so-called “affordable rent”, redefining “affordable” to be linked to local incomes. We will transform how land is available and how much it costs. We would scrap permitted development, which Members have talked eloquently
of already, and we would invest in making sure that all council and housing association homes are warm, safe and dry. The money we save in housing benefits will be recycled into helping tackle the causes of the housing crisis, and our new homes would meet green standards.

Tomorrow’s anniversary, marking two years since the Grenfell Tower fire, is a terrible reminder of the tragic consequences of not giving social housing tenants a voice. The tower block fire in Barking on Sunday, where more than a third of the properties were social housing, was a stark reminder that too little has changed. Highly flammable material on the side of a tall building, and residents’ complaints ignored—these lessons were not learned after the Lakanal fire a decade ago, and they have not been learned following the Grenfell Tower fire. We must do better.

2.58 pm

The Minister for Housing (Kit Malthouse): I commend the hon. Member for Warwick and Leamington (Matt Western) for securing this important debate. I agree with him that above all else, it should be the collective mission of the House to build the homes that the next generation needs.

I agree with other Members that the attendance across the House for the debate has been disappointing. I am sure none of us will take any pleasure from the fact that there was not a single Liberal Democrat in the Chamber to talk about this very important issue. It is indeed important, because since taking up this role last year, boosting the supply of housing of all types has been my night-and-day obsession as Housing Minister, so a largely useful and constructive debate such as today’s certainly helps.

For the most part, I am grateful that Members have come forward with constructive suggestions, and indeed questions, which we will try to answer—in written form if I cannot answer them today. I want to pick out one or two.

I agree with the hon. Member for Warwick and Leamington’s basic assertion that bad housing leads to lots of other bad things and that good housing sits at the base of a fruitful and happy life. A secure home is something to which we should aspire for all the people whom we serve, and it is certainly a central part of our mission. I was very affected by his specific point about a veteran whom he called soldier Y. I hope that he is engaging with the Coventry, Solihull and Warwickshire armed forces covenant partnership, which I understand does a fair amount of work in his region in connection with the covenant and the housing rights that come with it.

I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving such a balanced view of the last three or four decades of house building and the part that Governments of all types have played in producing an under-supply. Both my hon. Friend the Member for Southend West (Sir David Amess), who has sadly had to go and do his duty in Westminster Hall, and the hon. Member for Stroud (Dr Drew) referred to the complexity of the issue and suggested that there should be a cross-party effort to reach some kind of general solution.

Let me now issue a gentle reminder to Members. I understand that, in these circumstances, it is the role of the Front Bencher to point to a utopian future in which everything will be easy and simple and it will just be a matter of writing cheques and handing out shovels and houses will appear. However, this is a problem and a crisis that has been decades in the making, and I think we all have a duty to share some sense of responsibility.

Back in the days when I was a Westminster councillor, we were induced out of council house building and owning by the then Labour Government, who would only give us our decent homes money if we got rid of our council housing stock. A number of Members, not least the hon. Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter), tried to dredge up ancient history and point to some kind of ideological opposition to social housing among Government Members. In fact, more council houses were built in the last year of Margaret Thatcher’s 10 years as Prime Minister than were built in the 13 years of the new Labour Government.

The shadow Secretary of State, the right hon. Member for Wentworth and Dearne (John Healey), has often nodded in agreement about the lack of council house building during the years when he was part of the Government. I think that only about 2,500 council houses were built during those 13 years. Much has been said about the right to buy, but during all those years not a single finger was lifted against it. The policy persisted throughout the entire period, and is still popular with those who can benefit from it.

The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) rightly raised the issue of supply. The Government are committed to increasing the supply of all tenures of affordable housing, helping to meet the housing needs of a wide range of people including those who are on a pathway to home ownership. I am pleased to say that we are already delivering on our commitments: since 2010, we have delivered more than 407,000 new affordable homes, including more than 293,000 for rent. In fact, more affordable homes have been delivered in the past eight years than in the last eight years of Labour government. More than 481,000 households have been helped into home ownership through schemes such as Help to Buy and right to buy.

We are not complacent, however, and we are certainly not slowing down; far from it. Housing remains our top priority, and we are championing the delivery of more affordable homes. We want to see local authorities deliver a new generation of council homes across the country. That is why we scrapped the housing revenue account borrowing caps last October, freeing up councils to double their delivery and, we hope, to exceed that level. Removing the borrowing caps will also help to diversify the house building market, with councils more able to take on projects and sites that private developers would consider too small.

The abolition of the caps means that stock-owning councils such as Warwick now have the financial flexibility that enables them to borrow to increase council house building. Even councils that do not own housing can get on with building homes. They have the flexibility to borrow to build up to 200 without opening a housing revenue account, subject to obtaining a direction from the Secretary of State. I am keen for all councils to seize the opportunities available and quickly start ramping up delivery to meet local housing need. I am considering what assistance we can give councils that do not have HRAs, either by providing advice and expertise or by pairing them with councils that do have HRAs to help them to act quickly.
We support councils and housing associations with grant funding for the construction of new affordable homes. We have made over £9 billion available through the affordable homes programme, which will deliver 250,000 additional affordable homes by March 2022. We listen constantly to the affordable housing sector and work to create a stable investment environment to support the delivery of more affordable homes across the country. We have introduced strategic partnerships to offer housing associations greater flexibility, ensuring funding can be allocated where it is needed across multiple projects while still meeting overall delivery targets.

This funding certainty also makes it more viable for larger housing associations to take risks and invest in more ambitious projects, with greater delivery flexibilities and funding guaranteed over a longer period. And we have gone further, providing the sector with longer-term certainty of funding. In September last year, the Prime Minister announced a £2 billion long-term funding pilot starting in 2022, which will boost affordable housing by giving housing associations long-term certainty and moving away from the stop-start delivery that characterised previous approaches to funding. For the first time in their history, housing associations can now bid for funding up to a decade long.

This unprecedented approach will deliver more affordable homes and stimulate the sector’s wider building ambitions. Strategic partnerships and our 10-year funding commitment mark the first time any Government have offered housing associations such certainty. They will also allow them to explore the use of greater technology in house building. I visited a factory in Walsall in the west midlands recently where Accord Housing will be producing 1,000 homes for affordable and social rent out of the factory, and so good are the environmental standards of these new homes that there are lower arrears because people can afford to heat and light them more cheaply. There are huge opportunities coming out of this programme that I hope associations will take. We have also set a long-term rent deal, announcing that increases to social housing rents will be limited to the consumer price index plus 1% for five years from 2020. Through all these measures, we are creating an investment environment that supports both councils and housing associations to build more.

As set out in our housing White Paper, we are determined to support households who are locked out of the market, and therefore we are also funding affordable home ownership. I am pleased to say that through our affordable homes programme we have delivered 60,000 shared-ownership homes since 2010. We believe that shared ownership has an important role to play as part of a diverse and thriving housing market in helping those who aspire to home ownership but may be otherwise be unable to afford it.

This Government pledged to address overall housing supply in our 2017 housing White Paper and our ambition to deliver 300,000 homes per year on average by the mid-2020s was set out in the autumn Budget of 2017. The Government agree that affordable housing will play a vital role in reaching this target, which is why we have created stable investment for the sector; now it is time for housing associations and councils to step forward and build more.

We recognise the need for more social rent homes, which is why also in 2017 we announced an additional £2 billion of funding for the affordable homes programme to deliver social rent homes in areas of high affordability pressure. This funding should deliver at least 12,500 social rent homes in high-cost areas, in a move to support families struggling to pay their rent. This represents a real change in how we focus the Government’s grant funding, targeting our most affordable homes to the areas where they are most needed. I want to stress that a mix of different tenures is vital to meet the needs of a wide range of people and allow the sector to build the right homes in the right places.

Alongside affordable home ownership to help those struggling to purchase their first home, our expanded programme offers two rental products. Affordable rent enables us to maximise the number of homes built with any Government investment, while social rent will meet the needs of struggling families and those most at risk of homelessness in areas of the country where affordability is most pressured. We will continue to provide opportunities for more people to afford their own home and seek to build on the progress made in building new social homes as we approach this year’s spending review.

This Government are committed to delivering more affordable housing, as I have outlined. We want to support the delivery of the right homes, whether for rent or ownership, in the right places. We have listened to the sector and introduced a number of measures to create a more stable environment. We have increased the size of the affordable homes programme, reintroduced social rent, removed the housing revenue account borrowing caps for local authorities, announced £2 billion of long-term funding for housing associations through strategic partnerships right through a decade, and we are setting out a long-term rent deal for councils and housing associations in England from 2020.

The hon. Member for Croydon Central (Sarah Jones) raised the issue of Grenfell—as did the hon. Member for Kensington (Emma Dent Coad)—and she will know that much of my time has been focused on building safety. While we are committed to increasing supply across the country of all types of housing, not least for social rent, the hon. Member for Croydon Central is right to continue to challenge us on the work we still need to do to make sure those buildings are delivered and built in a safe environment. I am pleased that we managed to get our response to the Hackitt inquiry out last week. We have accepted all the recommendations and, indeed, gone further on them, but there is definitely more work to do. The House has my commitment that, however long I am in this job, and I am now coming up on 12 months—[HON. MEMBERS: “Hear, hear!”] Thank you. The House has my commitment that this will be one of my primary focuses. Many of us will attend memorial events tomorrow to commemorate the second anniversary of that appalling tragedy, and while it is a point at which we will remember the 72 lives that were lost, it is also a reminder to us all in this House that the system that was built up over a number of decades that resulted in that awful tragedy has to change.

3.10 pm

Matt Western: May I start by thanking everyone across the House for their incredibly valuable contributions to what I would agree with the Minister was a constructive and illuminating debate. I particularly thank the hon. Member for Southend West (Sir David Amess) and my hon. Friend the Member for Stroud (Dr Drew) for supporting and sponsoring this debate today.
As we have heard, it is generally understood that housing is particularly important, but that social housing is even more so. We have heard from across the country just how expensive housing can be in so many of our towns and cities. We have heard about multiples of 20 against average income, such is the expense of property—certainly in Cambridge, London and elsewhere.

We have also heard just how popular social housing and council housing can be and about the massive loss of stock we have suffered in recent decades. My hon. Friends the Members for Ipswich (Sandy Martin) and for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter) gave good examples of what can be done when local authorities have the foresight and the ambition to deliver good-quality social housing. We also heard illustrations from my hon. Friend the Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh), who described the reality for her constituents and the hardship that they face.

Elsewhere, my hon. Friend the Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders) talked about the struggles that people still face incurring the bedroom tax and asked why that tax still had not been cancelled.

The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) talked about the foresight and the ambition to deliver good-quality social housing. We also heard illustrations from my hon. Friend the Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Alan Brown), who highlighted the very positive reality north of the border and described what it had been possible to achieve in delivering housing as a result of being liberated from some of the constraints we have here. He also talked about the challenges and the threats from universal credit and of Help to Buy.

I also thank the hon. Member for Kilimanjaro and Loudoun (Alan Brown), who highlighted the very positive reality north of the border and described what it had been possible to achieve in delivering housing as a result of being liberated from some of the constraints we have here. He also talked about the challenges and the threats from universal credit and of Help to Buy.

I thank the shadow Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Croydon Central (Sarah Jones), for her excellent summary of the debate. I will not attempt to repeat that, but she rightly highlighted the reality of what has happened, as we find ourselves still reflecting on Grenfell two years on. She talked about all the mistakes that were made with Lakanal and described how people were indifferent and not listening. That case and those arguments have also been well set out in the campaign led by my hon. Friend the Member for Kensington (Emma Dent Coad). I thank the Minister for his summary and for his warm words, and I look forward to working with him in the future.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved.

That this House recognises that there is a housing crisis with too few genuinely affordable homes to rent and buy; further recognises that the number of new social rented homes built in recent years has been too low; notes that the Government has set a target to build 300,000 homes a year, which is unlikely to be achieved without building more social homes; further notes that Shelter’s recent report, A Vision for Social Housing, concluded that 3.1 million new social rented homes need to be built over the next 20 years; and calls on the Government to adopt a target of building 155,000 social rented homes, including at least 100,000 council homes, each year from 2022.

Parliament as a Workplace


3.14 pm

Ellie Reeves (Lewisham West and Penge) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered making Parliament a more modern, family friendly and accessible workplace.

It is a pleasure to open this debate. I place on record my thanks to the Backbench Business Committee for granting this debate and allowing it time in the main Chamber. As the House is currently debating the restoration and renewal of the Palace of Westminster, now seems a good opportunity for a concurrent debate about how we can improve the workings of Parliament better to support Members, staff and the public.

I know that the appetite for change varies from Member to Member and that no single person has all the answers. Change requires addressing many complex issues and I hope that debates such as this give Members an opportunity to put across their views. Parliament is an old building, and its methods and workings are unmistakably historic. Many of our practices are globally renowned and often make our parliamentary democracy the envy of the world. In other ways, we are stuck in the past, perhaps too afraid of reform.

That is not to say that some family-friendly and accessibility reforms have not been achieved. Over the past few years we have seen the creation of an onsite nursery and the recent introduction of proxy voting, and we currently have a more diverse representation in Parliament than ever before. Those have been made possible by a vast array of people and I want to place on record my thanks to Mr Speaker, the former Leader of the House, the shadow Leader of the House, Government and Opposition Whips, the House of Commons Commission, the Procedure Committee, the Women and Equalities Committee, the right hon. Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller) and my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips). From my own perspective, before entering Parliament, I was an employment rights lawyer for many years, specialising in maternity rights and family-friendly working. When my local MP retired at the 2017 general election, I agonised over whether to put myself forward, particularly as my son was only two at the time. It was the existence of the House of Commons nursery that made the decision to stand for Parliament possible. Two years on from that, with a husband who is also a sitting MP, it was the recent introduction of proxy voting that has enabled us to have a second child.

Those of us who are keen to continue the modernisation of Parliament know that we cannot stop here, especially given that it is 1,306 days since the last debate on the family friendliness of Parliament, initiated by my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips). From my own perspective, before entering Parliament, I was an employment rights lawyer for many years, specialising in maternity rights and family-friendly working. When my local MP retired at the 2017 general election, I agonised over whether to put myself forward, particularly as my son was only two at the time. It was the existence of the House of Commons nursery that made the decision to stand for Parliament possible. Two years on from that, with a husband who is also a sitting MP, it was the recent introduction of proxy voting that has enabled us to have a second child.

The fact that there has been change does not mean that we should stop there. If Parliament is to be truly representative of those we seek to serve, we must continue to look at ways to break down barriers for those who might consider putting themselves forward for public office. Shortly after my election in 2017, my hon. Friend
the Member for Bury North (James Frith) convened 11 newly elected Members of Parliament to produce a pamphlet on ideas for reforming Westminster. Together we came up with a range of far-reaching proposals that showed that there are MPs who want to help to improve the workings of Parliament for the benefit of all.

In my experience, one area that we should consider for reform is how Members of Parliament vote. While I recognise and respect that some Members advocate remote electronic voting, given the importance of parliamentary votes I believe that the act of physically attending the Lobby to be counted is an important part of our democratic process. It helps to ensure engagement of MPs and I know many of us use the time to raise issues with other colleagues. However, the voting system in its current form is time consuming, particularly when there are multiple votes. With each Division taking around 20 minutes, if we have eight or nine Divisions, 650 MPs are left walking around in circles through the voting Lobbies over and over for hours on end. That is not an efficient use of 650 MPs’ time.

Louise Haigh (Sheffield, Heeley) (Lab): I wish to place on record my agreement with my hon. Friend on that point. In my four short years as a Member I have spent more and more hours walking through the Lobby in multiple votes, especially in the complicated votes on Brexit. We should be here to take part in the debate, and physically present in the Lobby, but we should be able to speed up the process and vote electronically.

Ellie Reeves: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for her intervention.

I recall that, on the occasion of one of the EU votes, my Fitbit started buzzing because I had done 10,000 steps, but I had not left Parliament all day: I had just been walking in and out of the voting Lobby. It should not be like that. When we were voting on the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill—obviously an incredibly important issue—we were sometimes voting for nearly two hours, which is a long time and it could be done a lot more quickly. For many of us it is the difference between seeing our families that evening or not. As many will know, my son is a regular in the Lobbies. One vote at 7 pm means he can vote with me, but multiple votes means childcare having to be arranged and my not being able to see him that night.

Stephanie Peacock (Barnsley East) (Lab): I agree with my hon. Friend and it is about not just Members but the staff of the House seeing their families and getting home.

Ellie Reeves: My hon. Friend is absolutely right, and I will talk a bit more about that later. This is as much about those who work here as those sitting in the Chamber. Parliament is about a lot more than just us.

There are ways in which we could make the process take less time and be more efficient, while still observing and respecting parliamentary traditions. In recent years, the Clerks have moved from paper forms to recording votes on iPads. Using simple and straightforward technology, we could move to a system in which multiple votes can be registered at the same time. That would not be possible where votes are contingent on one another but, as they rarely are, it could significantly reduce the time we spend voting. Not only would that be a far more efficient use of Members’ time, but it would make a huge difference to those with caring responsibilities or suffering ill health.

In addition, the system of hundreds of Members queuing up to give their name to three Clerks can lead to long queues in the Lobbies, and colleagues have struggled at times with the cramped and claustrophobic conditions. I recall the evening of 15 January, when 432 Members formed a small crush to get into the No Lobby. Instead, we could have a series of electronic booths lined up in the Lobbies, which would speed up the process. It would be simpler, more efficient and, arguably, a lot more accessible.

Alongside the simplification of votes, it is important to look at the certainty of the parliamentary week. We live in extraordinary political times, and a degree of uncertainty and unpredictability will always come with that, but there must be a way to improve the system to provide some degree of routine and certainty to the parliamentary timetable.

At present, we organise our diaries week to week by finding out the next week’s agenda in the business statement on a Thursday morning. If we have late votes on a Monday, it gives Members with caring or childcare responsibilities only one and a half working days to secure arrangements. This can be further complicated by the addition of urgent questions, ministerial statements, Standing Order No. 24 applications and protected time for debates.

Following publication of the “Good Parliament” report, I am delighted that the Women and Equalities Committee has just announced an inquiry into ensuring the House of Commons meets the needs of both men and women and how it can best address equality issues. The right hon. Member for Basingstoke may wish to speak on this in more detail but, 100 years since women were given the right to vote, only 32% of current Members are female, so it is vital that we use such inquiries not only to understand the barriers to greater female representation but to endeavour to remove them.

The inquiry’s terms of reference mention the lack of predictability in, and advance knowledge of, parliamentary sitting patterns. The inquiry would welcome written submissions from anyone with experience of these issues. I hope that many Members will use this opportunity to highlight previous difficulties.

Even the smallest changes can have a big impact in giving certainty to those who work here. For example, the Leader of the House could attempt to provide a provisional fortnightly rundown of the business of the House. The past 20 years have seen widespread and welcome changes to parliamentary hours, and the days of all-night sittings are, thankfully, long gone, but we could look again at this area, perhaps through a Speaker’s Conference, better to judge the feeling across the House.

Members whose families reside inside or outside London will have differing opinions on when is best for Parliament to sit and, although such conversations can be difficult, we should not shy away from having them in order to improve and modernise. We could equally consider deferring more Divisions or allocating set times for casting votes, particularly if lots of votes are to follow the moment of interruption, especially on Mondays when that comes at 10 pm. We could instead defer those
Divisions to the next sitting day, for example, much as we do for other motions. That is not just for the benefit of Members; it would give Clerks, House staff and security personnel a better understanding of their working patterns. After all, this debate is as much about them as it is about us.

Bambos Charalambous (Enfield, Southgate) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that the lack of certainty about things such as recess dates is a problem because it does not allow people to plan holidays if they have children at school? That causes huge problems not only for Members but for staff in this place.

Ellie Reeves: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for pre-empting my next point. The cancellation of recesses this year will no doubt have had negative consequences for the work-life balance of those who help to facilitate the work of Parliament. Without the Clerks, Committee specialists, librarians, catering staff, security personnel, cleaners or the many others who make up the Westminster family, Parliament would grind to a halt and cease to work effectively. Many are restricted to taking time off when the House is in recess. The cancellation of two weeks of recess will no doubt have seen annual leave revoked, holidays cancelled and valuable time with friends and family postponed.

Moreover, I am aware that many of our recesses, although designed to coincide with school holidays, often reflect only London term times. While that is helpful for those who live in London, there are many MPs whose children’s school holidays clash with when Parliament is sitting, placing additional pressure on those Members to arrange suitable childcare for those times. Parliament is often accused of being too London-centric, and although that is not always warranted, we should perhaps be more mindful of that in future when deciding recess dates.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): I think that my hon. Friend knows that I fully support what she is saying, having brought up a very large family when the hours here were pretty terrible. Before she finishes, will she address the challenge we face in wanting to make this place more attractive and somewhere that a woman thinks it is possible to have a family and a proper life? A lot of women are being put off by the daftness of our routines.

Ellie Reeves: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention; I know that he cares strongly about these issues. Parliament is a fantastic place to work, and being a Member of Parliament is a real privilege. There has been lots of change but, as I have said, we should not stop there. We should always be looking at how to break down barriers, make this a more accessible workplace and encourage more and more people to enter.

Parliament has to work for everyone and be open to as many people as possible. For our representative democracy to be truly representative, we have to look outside to make sure that our practices fully reflect society. When I show constituents around Parliament, we often get on to the topic of prayer cards. Many are surprised that we still participate in daily Christian prayers. While I find the process of prayers at the start of the parliamentary day a calming influence and the support of the Speaker’s Chaplain invaluable, by limiting that part of our procedures to Christian beliefs only we are missing an opportunity to widen the appeal of Parliament and better reflect the country. I would fully welcome bringing other faith leaders into Parliament to offer a selection of readings that reflect the make-up of the communities that we represent. Likewise, for those of no religion, an apolitical “thought of the day” could be introduced. There is an opportunity here, too, to improve our customs better to reflect the world around us.

As I said earlier, while appetite for change varies from Member to Member, and while no one person has all the answers to improving how our parliamentary democracy works, it is clear that we must have more debates such as this to give Members a platform and an opportunity to express their views on how Parliament can best operate. It is undeniable that Westminster is often an outdated place. I am thankful for the previous efforts made by so many people to enhance and modernise our Parliament, including the Whips, who are always so understanding, particularly on childcare, but I acknowledge that they have to work within the existing frameworks.

As I hope I have made clear, this debate is not just about the work of Members. It is about making Parliament more modern and accessible for the thousands of other people who work on the parliamentary estate and those who wish to come here in future and make our democracy even more representative of those we seek to serve. Just as we needed the full transparency of proxy voting for those on parental leave, if we are to make Parliament a more modern, family-friendly and accessible workplace, we now need to make Divisions more straightforward and bring a degree of certainty to people’s work routines. If we can continue these conversations and set about enacting positive change, we will see our democracy flourish and reach our goal of becoming the Parliament that truly reflects society as a whole.

3.29 pm

Mrs Maria Miller (Basingstoke) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member for Lewisham West and Penge (Ellie Reeves) on securing this important debate, and I look forward to hearing the other contributions. I commend the work that has already been done, particularly, as she says, by the right hon. and learned Member for Camberwell and Peckham (Ms Harman), Mr Speaker and many others, including the former Leader of the House, my right hon. Friend the Member for South Northamptonshire (Andrea Leadsom). I am sure that the new Leader of the House will be a valiant champion of the need to ensure that this is a good place to work in future.

We have to start this debate with some cold, hard facts. We know that we are a group of people who are hugely committed to our communities, and that we are professional, sensible people, but all too often this place can be portrayed as chaotic because of the way that we do, or do not, organise ourselves. That is not only down to the Government’s motions and the Order Paper. We have to start to look at how this place looks from the outside if we really are to resolve the problems that we face in respect of this place, not only as a workplace for Members of Parliament, but as somewhere that represents our constituents.

Winston Churchill once said that “we shape our buildings and afterwards our buildings shape us.”
Never a truer word has been said of this place. I love this place and would never want to see Parliament move out of it, but we have to take it into account when we try to understand why it currently does not work as a workplace for so many people. The building was built for a time when this country was a very different place and very different people became Members of Parliament. How many people were wheelchair users back when this place was first built, or rebuilt after the fire? How many people were women? We know the answer to that one: absolutely none. This building was built and our procedures were set out when women and disabled people were not considered, and when dads had few responsibilities compared with those they have today. We have to take all these things into consideration as we move forward.

Mr Sheerman: The right hon. Lady is making an excellent point, as did the previous speaker, my hon. Friend the Member for Lewisham West and Penge (Ellie Reeves), but both are MPs quite close to London. The Speaker once came to Huddersfield and spent a lovely day with me. When he got off the train, he said, “This is a long way, isn’t it?” It is 192 miles. In some senses, the perspectives of those of who come to work here from a long distance away are qualitatively different from the perspectives of people who represent London and south-east England.

Mrs Miller: The hon. Gentleman has brought up an important point. Part of the problem we have is that each one of us is very different. I am a commuting MP, and my journey to and from this place takes an hour and 40 minutes. I am sure it does not take the hon. Member for Lewisham West and Penge an hour and 40 minutes to get home—I hope it does not; otherwise, she needs to have a chat with her Mayor of London. It is wrong to sweep us all into a “London and the south-east” bag and assume that we all have the same challenges. It is different for each one of us.

Mr Sheerman: It is fundamental, though, is it not? We start at 2.30 pm on a Monday because people have to get here from Scotland and the north of England, flying, using rail and so on, and these days we finish early on a Thursday because people have to get back to their constituencies. We are moulded a bit by the distances that many of us are from Parliament.

Mrs Miller: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right that those are factors to consider. In fact, one reason why I was not going to talk about start and finish times was that it is a specific discussion. If he will allow me to take issue slightly with what he said, I feel that certainty is far more important. We can all cope with a lot of things in life as long as we know what is going on. All too often, the chaos that I mentioned feels very real, not just to us and staff in our parliamentary offices, but to members of staff here. I have been asked a number of times in the Tea Room, “Ms Miller, do you know when the vote might come?” People want to be able to plan their days. The way in which this place is organised, and particularly the use of urgent questions, is a real problem for us, but I will come on to that in more detail in a moment.

Tom Brake: Does the right hon. Lady agree that another factor that must be taken into account is whether the Government of the day have a majority? She was elected in 2005, and I suspect that between 2005 and 2015, there was a degree of stability in people’s ability to plan work, because successive Governments had a majority. When that is not the case, things become much more unpredictable.

Mrs Miller: I understand the right hon. Gentleman’s point, but it is not the point that I am making. He is right that there is an unpredictability when we have to deal with enormous issues such as Brexit. I suppose that I am talking about the things that we can control that we are not controlling, and that, I think, is part of a modern workplace. I will come on to that in a bit more detail.

We all agree that being a Member of this place is an immense honour, but that does not mean that we have to keep it in a time warp. Sometimes we feel the great pressure of the history of this place. We may not want to challenge what has gone before for fear of being seen to be disrespectful of it. We must acknowledge that that is a pressure on each of us as Members, perhaps in different ways.

Modernisation would help us to attract new and different people to being Members of Parliament. Yes, perhaps it would attract more women, more disabled people or people with younger children, but it would be people who want a less chaotic and more certain place in which to work—a place to which they feel they can contribute.

There is a much more fundamental issue here for all of us, regardless of our gender, sexuality or ethnicity. If we thought about this place in a more focused way, it would help us to retain Members of Parliament. This place is at its best when we have Members who have been here for many years as well as Members who are brand new, because that gives a perspective on procedure, debate and the history of this place. We need to work far harder at retaining MPs. Women in particular move away from this place far too soon. It would also help us to support better our staff in our parliamentary offices, and those parliamentary staff who support us so freely and so well. We have a responsibility to act to make sure that this is a modern workplace.

Another more fundamental issue that I will place on the table for others to comment on is trust in Parliament. We can take this debate today at a very superficial level—as being about women with children, childcare and nurseries—but it is also about how much trust people have in a workplace that looks more akin to the 18th century than the 21st.

The Brexit process has challenged people’s trust not just in parliamentarians, but in the nature of Parliament. We need to keep that in mind as we move forward and think very carefully about the challenge that the hon. Member for Lewisham West and Penge has put on the table today. We cannot continually kick into the long grass the need to modernise this place and to get to grips with some of the issues set out by her, me, the hon. Member for Huddersfield (Mr Sheerman) and the right hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Tom Brake).

Some of the groundwork has been done with “The Good Parliament” guide, and I think that all of us would want to put on record our sincere thanks to Professor Sarah Childs for what she has done. Some of those changes, as
the hon. Member for Lewisham West and Penge, said, have come into play. The nursery is very important, not just for us, but for our staff. My staff use that nursery, and I can keep great staff, which I might not otherwise have been able to do, because we have that nursery.

Proxy voting is long overdue, but being modern is not just about people who have small babies. My very small babies are now very large babies; in fact, the youngest is 17. It is actually even more difficult—you might have some sympathy with this, Madam Deputy Speaker—to look after a 12-year-old, if you have no childcare, when you are trying to go and vote or have been called in for a meeting during a recess. On more than one occasion, my children were parked with a policeman at the back of the Speaker’s Chair—thank goodness for those policemen providing that help and support—because nothing else was available. As we think of modernisation, we must think more roundly about the pressures on our lives at times other than those very important times when we have small children, and that we think about buildings and procedures hand in hand.

I hope that this debate will make us feel that we need a clear plan for moving forward. I pay tribute to Sarah Childs for her report. I pay tribute to the work that the Speaker has done, the work done by the Commons reference group on representation and inclusion, and all the other elements of work that has been going on, including, obviously, around the Cox report. Many different things are happening, but to me it all feels very fragmented. As somebody who is incredibly interested in this issue, I have found it very difficult to keep up with what is really going on. The right hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington, who is on the Commission, will of course know far more than I do, and will be on top of it all, but it can be very difficult for many of us to know the long-term vision for this House as a modern workplace.

It feels very much as though—this is meant not as a criticism, but as an observation of fact—modernisation is being considered in quite a piecemeal way. We need to think about the risks that that poses to our being able to hold people to account for delivery of modernisation. We need to have clear managerial responsibility for modernisation. At the end of this debate, who will be responsible for making sure that the things we have talked about actually happen? I do not think it should be the Leader of the House, because he is also part of Government—it should be wider than that. We need to think about the procedures and the processes in play.

One immediate and very deep concern that I have is for the mental health of our parliamentary and constituency staff, and of Members of Parliament, because the chaotic approach and uncertainty that I mentioned are well-known triggers for mental health problems. If we do not act quite swiftly on this, we are at risk of being widely criticised for not acting. Constant uncertainty has an impact. We do not know when debates will start every day, because we do not know how many urgent questions there will be. We think, “Does that mean I will have to cancel or move meetings?” Of course, it is not just us who do that—it is also our parliamentary staff. Some Members who do not have parliamentary staff here have to do it themselves. It is a very inefficient use of time.

The hon. Member for Lewisham West and Penge highlighted inefficiencies around voting, but I would say that the issue is much more widespread than that. The right hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington talked about Brexit. Yes, that has certainly brought a lot more unpredictability into the system, but we could take control of a great deal of that unpredictability and that chaotic feel.

I call on those who are able to influence these matters to hold an urgent review of the House timetable. I would be interested in the Leader of the House’s comments. He is relatively new to the post, but I am sure that he already has well-formed views on these things. Could we, for instance, put urgent questions before questions and debates? If these questions are so urgent, let us have them before we start the day. As the hon. Member for Huddersfield said, most Members of Parliament are here in London. The vast majority are not like me, commuting on the train. We could therefore perhaps have urgent questions at 8.30 am, before the day starts, so that they do not disrupt the flow of Members’ days—or perhaps from 9.30 am to 10.30 am, to help people with caring responsibilities. That would be a way forward. It seems straightforward to me; I am not sure why we do not do it.

When I joined this place, I had three children, the youngest of whom was three. I have a husband, and I care for two elderly parents who live with me. I am a living and breathing sandwich generation person, and I do not think we speak up enough for sandwich generation people. We often hear people with young children talk, but we do not hear those with caring responsibilities talk enough. I believe greatly that we should all do more to look after our elderly and ailing parents. As well as talking about nurseries, we need to talk about elder care issues, for not only ourselves but our members of staff.

We need a Parliament to be proud of, that attracts the best to stand for election and to be members of staff here, regardless of their age, ethnicity, gender, sexuality or caring responsibilities. Our building, procedures, culture and philosophy here are hugely important—they shape our Parliament, but what should also shape our Parliament is the people we represent. How does a young woman who comes here to visit me feel when I take her into Committee Room 14, which I love, and she sees no women on the wall, just a group of extremely old men? How does any person from a black and minority ethnic background feel about how representative this Parliament is of them when they see nobody of any minority ethnic background on the walls? I will probably now be corrected; there will be someone somewhere. How does a wheelchair user feel when they have to use the service lift to get around?

We need to take all those issues into account when we talk about restoration and renewal. How do people feel when their meetings with their MP are cancelled at a moment’s notice because three urgent questions are granted on the day, with little notice, causing the sort of chaos that we now see daily?

James Gray (North Wiltshire) (Con): I apologise for not having been here for the beginning of the debate; I hope I am not being discourteous. I am listening carefully to my right hon. Friend, and I agree strongly with most of what she says. However, I am concerned about her suggestion of having urgent questions at some other time than when the House is sitting. Surely the whole
point of an urgent question is that a Member of Parliament—a Back Bencher—can raise an urgent matter, and the Speaker may or may not allow that to occur. If there is a special slot for UQs at some time other than when the House is sitting, surely they would lose their entire purpose.

**Mrs Miller:** My hon. Friend is right. I suppose I am suggesting that we would sit from half-past 9. Moving towards a more nine-to-five approach to our day here would not only be better for people who live in London; this would then look a little bit more like everybody else’s workplace. I do not know whether the right hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington experiences the same thing, but when I am on the train in the morning, my constituents say, “Why were you on the train at 20 minutes past 10 on Monday night? That can’t be a very effective use of your time.” I am not particularly suggesting that we should have urgent questions when the House is not sitting. I am just suggesting that we need to think about organising them into the day, so that they do not continually create a sense of chaos, with no one knowing when debates will start or finish.

**Mr Sheerman:** I thank the right hon. Lady for giving way again; she is being very kind. She has paid a lot of tributes, but I hope she does not mind me saying that she has missed one. Having been in this place a long time, I know that it became civilised because women came here. I do not want to use the “B” word too often, because I will get a bad reputation, but Tony Blair made a hell of a difference to this place. He helped to increase the number of women in this place, and women have changed it a lot since 1997. There is much more to do, but we should put it on the record that women have already civilised this place almost unrecognisably from when I was a young MP.

**Mrs Miller:** That is an interesting reflection. Having a broader range of people in Parliament, regardless of gender, would also have a civilising effect, but I tend to agree. It is nice to have a Parliament that resembles the constituencies we represent.

This is such an important debate—perhaps even more so than the hon. Member for Lewisham West and Penge intimated. It is about trust in this place, because if this place does not look like anything else and does not act in an apparently professional and organised manner, we undermine our constituents’ trust in a place that is there to represent them and their views. Parliament enables us to serve our constituents, and we need to ensure, in planning for the future, that this is a place they can relate to and is accessible for them. Right now, we can make real change quite quickly and create far more certainty in our days by stopping the use of UQs at the beginning of the day to delay, amend or sometimes even obliterate debate completely because of the number that have been granted.

I will close my remarks there, but reflecting what the hon. Member for Huddersfield said a few moments ago, let me say that when I first met you, Madam Deputy Speaker, you said: “Women in this place have to work twice as hard as men, because we are still not 50% of the people here.” You are absolutely right, and hon. Ladies will know that. Part of my contribution to the debate was really to reflect on the comment you made to me all those years ago. We do need far more women here to have the civilising influence that the hon. Gentleman was talking about.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing):** I am delighted to hear the right hon. Lady say that. The situation has improved somewhat since those days, but it has a long way to go. I can say that with the impartiality of the Chair, because I do not think there is anyone who will disagree.

3.50 pm

**John Cryer** (Leyton and Wanstead) (Lab): First, I ought to mention that when I applied to speak in this debate, I told Mr Speaker that I might have to leave the debate slightly early, and I apologised for that—ironically, for family reasons.

I want to speak mainly about the accessibility part of this debate, but I will mention one or two other things briefly. When the right hon. Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller) mentioned that there are no ethnic minority portraits in the Palace, she said somebody would stand up and correct her, and that is what I am going to do. I have seen one, and that is Shapurji Saklatvala, who was the MP for Battersea North a long time ago, before the war. He is one, but what about David Pitt or Learie Constantine, who were both Members of the House of Lords? I have seen no illustrations of them. In particular, Learie Constantine was a giant of 20th-century politics. His actions led to the first Race Relations Act in the 1960s, among many other things, and he was the first non-white peer to be appointed, again in the 1960s. There is no recognition of Learie Constantine or, for that matter, of David Pitt, who equally made a great contribution.

I want to mention one other thing before I move on to accessibility. To this day, it is more difficult for women to be MPs, particularly if they are travelling from a long way away from Parliament. I can remember one example. I will not name this particular individual because she is a friend of mine, and I have not warned her that I was going to mention it. When I was first elected in 1997, I remember one of the many women elected in that intake, who was a terrific MP and a great speaker. If anybody in this Chamber saw her speak, they would have thought that woman was going places—that she was going to be in a future Cabinet, or whatever. She had small children and a constituency about 100 miles from Parliament, and within weeks she said to me, “I’m going to do one term, and then I’m off. I just cannot juggle everything I’ve got to do with the hours.” Some things have improved, but many of them still have a long way to go.

**Mr Sheerman:** My hon. Friend, because of his family history, knows about this subject better than almost anybody I know. I was a friend of his father and I am still a friend of his mother, who had adjoining constituencies to mine. He will know, because he has that dual perspective, how different it is being a Member of Parliament with a constituency in, say, Yorkshire—a long way away—and being a London MP. If we are going to modernise this House, we have to balance the two very carefully indeed.

**John Cryer:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right. I think things have changed to a large extent. He mentioned my dad, who was an MP here in the 1970s, when there were all-night sittings. From 1974 to 1979, just on our side of the House, we lost 17 MPs in five years from
heart attacks, strokes, haemorrhages and all the rest of it. Things have changed, but as I have said, they still have a long way to go.

Tom Brake: The hon. Gentleman is being generous in giving way. Might the colleague he mentioned have benefited from job sharing for Members of Parliament, if that was something we had introduced?

John Cryer: That would be quite tricky to introduce—we could probably have a whole week of debates about such things, so I will not dwell on that.

Let me move on to accessibility. We all have disabled constituents—members of local associations, Liberal Democrat organisations, or constituency Labour parties—who come to see us, often in wheelchairs. They find it difficult to get in and out of the Palace of Westminster, despite the efforts of staff who work hard to make things as easy and accessible as possible for those with disabilities. A lot of community groups, particularly Afro-Caribbean community groups, tend to have an older age profile with members who often walk with difficulty or are in wheelchairs, and who find it difficult to get in and out of the supposed mother of Parliaments.

Some years ago I was not an MP but a trade union officer. I was the political officer for what was then the Transport and General Workers Union and is now Unite the union. It is the biggest union in the country, and has a large number of disabled members. I remember organising a lobby, and as usual with lobbies the meeting took place on the main Committee corridor. We were campaigning to keep the Remploy factories open, and the industrial officer who organised that lobby with me was Jennie Formby, now general secretary of the Labour party—I still work with her. There was only a small group of people in wheelchairs, but I vividly remember it taking an hour and a half to take those people from the Committee corridor to Carriage Gates where they could get in cabs. Even getting people picked up in cabs was tricky—it was not just about getting them from the corridor to Carriage Gates.

This is supposedly a people’s Parliament, but if a large section of the population cannot easily get in and out, can it really be that? We must change things. I am not sure exactly how we should change them in a way that it is easy for everyone to get in and out, but I think it needs to be easier than it is now.

I should also make the case for fathers. As I said, my wife still bears the childcare burden because of the inflexibility of what happens in this place, and I am disappointed by that. We should always remember that dads want to spend time with their children and families as well, and in this modern age people should be able to balance those obligations with their career. Many of my peers who work in business or in other organisations increasingly take employment and career choices that mean they have more flexibility to be with their families: maybe not working on Fridays, taking an early or a late finish to be able to do the school run, or being in an annualised hours position where they can take school holidays off. Many of our wives are successful people in their own careers. We want to be able to help them and contribute to raising our families, so that they can pursue their careers alongside us.

Parliament has an important role in setting the tone, not just in the delivery of democracy in this House but in what we as a Parliament expect from the wider economy. There have been many debates in this Chamber and in Westminster Hall about the impact of difficulties around childcare, family choices and practices in the workplace: the fact that dads are not having access to shared parental leave because it will have an impact on their career, and the “mummy track” impact on mums, losing the salary and seniority they deserve as a consequence of caring for children. We need to be saying that we want reform in this place, as well as in the wider economy. We should set the tone here and then legislate, through the Government, to ensure that the same is the case for the wider country.

We should give thanks, as other hon. Members have, for the progress that has been made. As a new Member, I did not know that the nursery in 1 Parliament Street used to be a wine bar. That was news to me. Apparently there was a debate about whether we needed one fewer pub in this place. I do not know why we have a pub at all. I know that might be a controversial statement, but I have never had one in my workplaces before. A nursery seems perfectly sensible, and I welcome that.

[John Cryer]

3.37 pm

Darren Jones (Bristol North West) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Lewisham West and Penge (Ellie Reeves) for securing this important debate, and other colleagues for their contributions.

I wanted to speak in this debate because I think there are two purposes to the drive to continue the reform of Parliament. The first is to ensure that Parliament is as attractive a workplace as possible for as many people as possible. I am always disappointed when, either on a school visit or in my constituency, I ask people to put their hands up if they would like to take over from me as the next Member of Parliament for Bristol North West, and there are very few people—this includes young children and people at my coffee mornings or my constituency pub politics—who want to do that. I am sure there are a whole host of reasons why people might not want to become a Member of Parliament, but it is a huge shame for this Parliament and for our country.

One of those reasons—is this true especially for women, because even with hands-on fathers such as myself, women still bear the burden of child caring responsibilities, as does my wife, who I pay tribute to today—is that people see the chaos. People see the lack of planning, the living in two locations, and think, “How on earth could I do the school run or deal with nursery?” As I am now learning, with multiple children that becomes even harder. We must continue to reform this place so that it is somewhere to which people from across the spectrum of our community wish to come and contribute, and answer that public service calling. People need a workplace that works for them and their family.
I benefited from proxy voting after the birth of my second daughter, Edie, when I was able to proxy vote via my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy). There was no clear distinction between the arrival of my first and my second. My first daughter, Ophelia, was born when we were having crunch votes on Brexit. My phone was ringing in the delivery suite, asking whether I was available to vote. I was allowed off the Whip on that occasion, but in the immediate days after the arrival of my daughter, when a father wants to be at home to help and contribute, I had to come back and forth to vote. Proxy voting has solved that, but—this was mentioned in the debate on proxy voting, because I was here for it—dads are able to benefit from proxy voting for only two weeks. If I want to take more time in a shared parental leave setting, as I could do in a workplace outside of here, I am unable to do so. That is one example of why the case for reform and modernisation needs to continue.

I should pay tribute and thanks. There are, of course, some benefits to raising a family here in Parliament. I shall just share a short story, which is loosely related to the topic today. My wife took my two daughters to see her sister-in-law in Washington DC recently. Of course, to take children on to a plane they need passports. It was very easy to get my hon. Friend the Member for Lewisham West and Penge, as someone with standing in our community, to sign the passport documents to authorise that my daughters are real. Sadly, my hon. Friend forgot to put her passport number on the form. My wife went to the passport office. I was in the constituency, an example of having to live in two locations, and received a call from my wife in distress. It was the last date to be able to get the passports sorted, otherwise I would not be able to sign off the form. To the rescue was my hon. Friend the Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell), who turned up at the passport office here in London and filled in the form for my hon. Friend in the constituency. It was a great experience that others have who travel shorter distances.

On that note, Madam Deputy Speaker, I again congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Lewisham West and Penge on continuing the debate. I congratulate other right hon. and hon. Members on continuing the debate. I congratulate other right hon. and hon. Members on continuing the push for reform at pace, to make this a place where mums and dads who want children and want to be able to spend time with their family will come and contribute to the public service and leadership of our country, so that together we can lead that change for the economy, too.

4.4 pm  

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): I, too, congratulate the hon. Member for Lewisham West and Penge (Ellie Reeves) on this excellent debate. It is sad that it is not more broadly attended because it is an important topic. As a Member of Parliament who has to spend anywhere between 10 and 15 hours a week travelling to and from my constituency, I was grateful to hear of the great experiences that others have who travel shorter distances.

Members have made important contributions. The late and much-missed Jo Cox said that we in Westminster “are behind the curve compared with working practice in much of industry, and the charitable and public sectors, and that is a problem... if we act differently and change the culture and working practices here, we can change how others operate. We should do that, because we are here to change and improve the United Kingdom.”—[Official Report, 10 November 2015; Vol. 602, c. 46WH.] I could not agree more. If we are to make laws and policies that are forward thinking and progressive, we must get our own house in order.

When I came to this place, I could not help thinking it was a cross between Downton Abbey and Hogwarts. I know people have great affection for the Houses of Parliament, but there is no doubt it is stuck in the past. It is steeped in great history, but it is not forward looking enough. It has a rich history of failing to be a workplace that is anywhere near as functional or inclusive as it should be. The hon. Member for Bristol North West (Darren Jones) spoke of his shock and surprise when he arrived here to see how many pubs there were. I shared that experience.

Of the many places I have ever worked—the corporate industry, the energy sector, other MPs’ offices, foreign Governments—the only place I have seen something similar is the media. I started at Good Morning Television the year after the last pub in the building had been closed, and it was closed for a very good reason. People often visit us here in our workplace—for example, we bring constituents into this place—and it is still a mystery to me that there are so many pubs and places to buy alcohol and that alcohol is served during the day at receptions.

None the less, progress has been made. When we introduced proxy voting, I think we all breathed a sigh of relief. It has been interesting to hear from male colleagues whose partners have recently had babies or are about to have them and who have missed out on proxy voting but who will now benefit from it. My hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow East (David Linden) has just introduced a proposal for extended parental leave for those who have premature babies. That is a sensible proposal that I hope the Minister will consider.

Dame Laura Cox’s report last October concluded that a “culture of deference, subservience, acquiescence and silence” was enabling abuses of power and the mistreatment of colleagues to go unchecked. It should not have taken one of our colleagues having to come here in a wheelchair on the day she was due to give birth to force proxy voting through. She was incredibly brave in what she did—she stood by her principles—and it is because of her that we have finally taken that step forward.

We have heard many stories about an endemic culture that normalises bullying and harassment, which continue to permeate our politics. That is the sad reality of decades and centuries of ancient tradition in this place. We have plans to refurbish this place. It is predicted to cost between £4 billion and £6 billion of taxpayers’ money just to bring this place and the other place up to standard.
The Scottish Parliament, which will shortly celebrate its 20th anniversary, cost a little under half a billion pounds. We could build between eight and 10 Scottish Parliaments for the cost of the refurbishment. Some argue that this place would be better turned into a museum and that we could build a new Parliament in another part of the UK.

**Mrs Miller:** I did not want to stop the hon. Lady’s flow, but she referred earlier to the Cox report and the grievance procedures. I hope that she will have noted that we have secured a short debate on the Floor of the House next Tuesday to press for progress in those areas. I hope that she will be able to support that debate.

**Hannah Bardell:** The right hon. Lady has read my mind, because I was coming to that. I am glad to see that among the threadbare business for next week there will be an update on that important piece of work. It is very important that we move that forward. I commend her on the important work that she and the Women and Equalities Committee, which she chairs, have done on this. She said that the Brexit process had challenged people’s trust in politics and in this place. I agree with that and would go further: it has exposed the crumbling relic of a democratic institution that this place is. We face the prospect of having a candidate for Prime Minister who wants to prorogue Parliament and have a no-deal Brexit, which will have a devastating impact. How will we get public trust if we cannot even have proper business and legislation in this place?

The right hon. Lady talked about the built environment and the paintings around this place. I have had the good fortune to sit on the Speaker’s Advisory Committee on Works of Art, and it has been a privilege to do so and particularly to see the work that has been done on the 209 Women project. I commend all those involved in that project, but during that period, I learned that 25 times more money had been spent over the past 20 years on buying pictures of men for this place than had been spent on buying pictures of women. Let us not forget that the photographs of the female parliamentarians who took part in the 209 Women project were taken by female photographers, who were not paid, which is a really important point. When we are trying to support women and their work, we must remember that they should be properly recognised. Without radical changes to this place to make it more inclusive, we will not properly reflect society.

We have made significant strides. We are the gayest Parliament in the world, or one of the gayest, and I am proud to be a woman who is gay in this place. When I stood for election and for selection, I stood against four men. I looked at the line-up and thought, “Why do I want to do this? Why do I want to go up against four men to go to a place that is very male dominated?” I did it because I wanted to be part of the change that I know many young women cannot see.

In Scotland, we have also made significant strides. We have a gender-balanced Cabinet. When Nicola Sturgeon became First Minister, she was one of only a handful of leaders in the world to do that. It is really important that we build a building that is not just a building for people who are hard-working, relatable and can bring their personal experiences to this place. We saw that in the most recent election. There are Members across this House with a vast array of life experiences, but we have to make sure that we have that not just in Parliament and its elected representatives, but in our media. I often look up at the Press Gallery, at the press who are looking down at us, and I do not see many female faces or people of colour. It is really important that we have people reporting on our politics who are as diverse as possible.

We have had contributions from Members who have spoken about access to this place. If this building was being built from scratch today, there is absolutely no way in which it would meet health and safety standards. The hon. Member for Lewisham West and Penge talked about the voting system. We have proxy voting, but electronic voting would save us a huge amount of time. On the last count that I did, which was in March, I calculated that we had spent 205 hours—five and a half working weeks—just voting. Given that Parliament sits for only 35 or 36 weeks a year, a huge amount of time is being wasted just on voting. Nobody is arguing that we should not be here debating and voting. That is extremely important, but, as the right hon. Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller) said, perhaps we could have an allotted time for urgent questions and have predictability in our business, particularly when we have people travelling from our constituencies, businesses and other organisations to come to see us in Parliament. Having to cancel meetings at the last minute and not being able to get back for children’s events and caring responsibilities is a ridiculous situation. There is no other such employment anywhere. We do our constituents an injustice, and in my view we cannot properly represent them and their issues when there is such a lack of predictability, progress and activity from a legislative perspective. Brexit has dominated so much of the legislative timetable that it has created and exposed the inadequacies of the system.

I understand that people like the banter and to have a wee chat in the voting Lobbies, but for goodness’ sake, we live in a modern world. We should be able to have those meetings and engage with one another. It just exposes the inaccessibility of the Government and the inability to get answers from them that people feel the need to use the time in the voting Lobbies just to corner other people, because they cannot get the proper responses, meetings and time that they feel they need.

**Tom Brake:** I want to use this opportunity to draw to the attention of the hon. Lady and other Members present to the fantastic opportunity that we have with the Northern Estate programme, as part of which we shall build a, I think badly named, temporary Chamber—a Chamber that could in fact be permanent. If we cannot get reform here—which is quite difficult to do, because there is a certain amount of inertia—we should make sure that for that temporary Chamber, which we will be sitting in from about 2025 onwards, those issues are at the very least tested, so that if they are successful, they can be reintroduced here when we come back to a new Palace of Westminster in 2031 or thereabouts.

**Hannah Bardell:** I thank the right hon. Gentleman for that important point. However, if I am still here in 2031 and Scotland is not an independent country, I will eat my hat, quite literally. The thought that I would still be having to come to this place horrifies me.

We do not have a seat in the Chamber for every Member. So many times I have heard people argue, “We need to queue up and vote in the Lobbies because
people need to be here for the debate,” yet we can only fit half the Members of this place into this Chamber to listen and to debate. For goodness’ sake—it is common sense. Let us have a Chamber that is big enough. I know of so few Parliaments—I have been in Parliaments all over the world, including Malawi at the beginning of last year—that do not have electronic voting. The European Parliament and the Council of Europe have it, as do the Scottish Parliament, the Welsh Assembly and the Northern Ireland Assembly. It is not difficult, so for goodness’ sake, let us just get on and do it.

The hon. Member for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips), in a recent speech, made a point about half terms and summer breaks. She included reference to experiences in Scotland. In parts of England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland, the recesses do not match up to the holidays. I have colleagues who sometimes have an overlap of less than 10 days, so they cannot even get a break with their families. I am in no doubt that we have a huge amount of privilege being in this place, and this is not about having a rant and a moan; it is about saying to our constituents, “Look, we could do a much better job for you, and a much better job by you, and we want people—from across the social and economic spectrum could be encouraged into this place if it had a proper, modern working ethic.”

I shall finish by reflecting on some of the experiences of my staff, many of whom have been with me since I was first elected. About the end of 2015, we started an all-party group on deaths abroad and consular services, because we had two constituents—women—who had been killed abroad in suspicious circumstances. Since then, we have taken evidence from about 60 families across the UK who have lost loved ones abroad. That has been a harrowing and deeply distressing experience for me and my staff—nothing like the experience that those families have had, but none the less the vicarious traumas that my staff and I have experienced has been significant.

We have worked with the parliamentary authorities to get the right emotional support, and it has become very clear to me that there is not appropriate emotional support for staff members. All our staff members do an incredible job, and they often have to deal with distressing and difficult constituency work. We must do much more, through the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority and the other authorities, to ensure that our staff get the proper support when they come to work for an MP, because we are all individual employers and we have a very important responsibility to our staff to ensure that they are properly protected. They will be able to serve our constituents properly only if they get the right support, and this place will be a modern Parliament that can properly reflect all parts of the UK and all people who live in it only if we can make it a modern and sensible working place.

4.18 pm

Valerie Vaz (Walsall South) (Lab): There are some heavyweight names attached to the motion: that of my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Cumberwell and Peckham (Ms Harman), the right hon. Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller), and my hon. Friend the Member for Lewisham West and Penge (Ellie Reeves), who opened the debate with an outstanding, wide-ranging speech. It was right to bring this matter to our attention and to keep it on the agenda.

Before my hon. Friend the Member for Leyton and Wanstead (John Cryer) goes off to do his bit in childcare, I have to say that it is good to see that my hon. Friend the Member for Lewisham West and Penge has dispatched him to do that. It would be interesting to hear from him on what it was like to be the child of an MP. It certainly did not put him off. He was also an older child of another MP—both his father and his mother were Members of Parliament. It is good to see him in his place, but we accept that he has other duties to go and do.

Many Members are probably not aware that the sitting time changes were thanks to Dame Joan Ruddock, who pulled together a group of cross-party Members. We consulted and voted on the various proposed times. It is pleasing that the Health Secretary, a hands-on-dad, was also involved.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bristol North West (Darren Jones) was part of a group of new MPs, along with my hon. Friend the Member for Lewisham West and Penge, who contributed to an important Fabian Society pamphlet about change. I wrote the introduction. I did not agree with all the suggestions in the pamphlet, but it was good to see that new Members were proposing changes.

A number of reports have been published. Many Members have referred to “The Good Parliament” by Professor Sarah Childs, which was commissioned by the Speaker and published as long ago as 2016. Its 43 recommendations address three parliamentary dimensions. Even before its publication, people were making trivial remarks such as “Oh, it is about everyone using the same toilet.” Professor Childs had to arrange many meetings to try to convince people that hers was a serious and hard-hitting report.

As I have said, the report identified three parliamentary dimensions. The first was “Equality and Participation”, which asked

“how a diverse group of MPs might be selected for, and elected to, Parliament”.

The second, “Parliamentary Infrastructure”,

“covers everything from the buildings and furniture of Parliament to the official rules and working practices”.

The third, “Commons Culture”, looked beyond the formal rules to examine the parliamentary culture and its effect on diversity.

Who selects parliamentary candidates is a matter for the parties. My hon. Friend the Member for Huddersfield (Mr Sheerman), who is not present at the moment, has put the responsibility for all-women shortlists squarely on Tony Blair. I would say to him that many members of the Labour party, women and men, fought long and hard to secure all-women shortlists. As a result, 49% of the parliamentary Labour party are women. That movement rose from the grassroots to the higher echelons of the party, and 1997, when so many women were elected to Parliament, was an important milestone.

Tom Brake: Does the hon. Lady agree that some fantastic organisations are working to improve diversity in the House, notably Operation Black Vote? I mention OBV by way of an apology to her and to the Leader of the House, because I have to attend an event that it is hosting here this afternoon. The event will finish by 5 pm, and if I do not leave I will miss the opportunity to support and, perhaps, mentor a person from OBV to ensure that people from ethnic minorities are better represented in the House.
Valerie Vaz: I absolutely agree with the right hon. Gentleman, and I congratulate Sir Simon Woolley on his elevation in the Queen’s birthday honours. It is well deserved. I mentored someone from Operation Black Vote last year. It has an incredibly good set of people who come from different backgrounds; the person whom I mentored worked in social care. That is the kind of organisation that we need to have.

I do not know if you are aware of this, Madam Deputy Speaker, but the Commissions of both Houses have responded to the UK gender-sensitive parliament audit, the first ever such audit produced in the UK. The Commissions are monitoring and publishing annual progress against four of the audit’s priority recommendations. The kind of recommendations that they are prioritising are

“Developing a parliamentary policy for children and families”, informed by good practice in other Parliaments;
“responding to the Cox report, and...forthcoming inquiries” on bullying, harassment and sexual misconduct; awareness of the support available to MPs, peers and staff
“to address abuse and threats via social media”;
and making information
“more readily available on the different groups or organisations in Parliament with specialist knowledge...and clearly signposted” in order to
“support parliamentarians to take account of gender impacts in their work”.

We are pleased that the monitoring will continue.

Many Members have mentioned restoration and renewal, which gives us an opportunity to focus on the physical aspects. We need to make life much easier for people with disabilities or hearing difficulties. In new buildings such as Portcullis House, it is much easier for those with hearing difficulties to hear people. Everything possible has to be done to make Parliament accessible.

The right hon. Member for Basingstoke is right: a new building, rather than just talking to the political parties, but I wonder if they did not want to do that, and that they would rather just talk to the political parties, but I wonder if

Mrs Miller: Does the hon. Lady think the current House of Commons Commission is accountable, and if not would she support change?

Valerie Vaz: Well, we are all elected, and we are all appointed by our parties; we also have two non-executives who sit—[ Interruption. ] The right hon. Lady says we are appointed, but the Leader of the House and I are on it by virtue of our parties through the usual channels; that is the way it works. I am sure she is not casting any aspersions on the previous or current Leader of the House. It is an interesting way of working. The Clerks—the House authorities—have to be responsible for the way the House operates, and then things are done through the Commission. The fact that we have a Commission is very good. I sat on the House of Commons Governance Committee; we heard evidence on how things work, and things changed as a result of that. There is an opportunity, if Members wish, to have another House of Commons Governance Committee—whether the Leader of the House and I would be on it, I do not know. The work is disseminated, however, as the right hon. Lady will see if she checks the intranet.

Of course we also have the Cox report, and Alison Stanley has now reported on whether the independent complaints and grievance scheme works. Her report makes for interesting reading. A unit has been tasked with implementing some work. We have a newly appointed independent director of cultural transformation, Julie Harding, who is doing town hall meetings with staff and trying to understand what goes on in order to get cultural change, and that will continue.

In a previous debate, I said I did not know what was happening to Professor Sarah Childs’ recommendations, and suggested that we do what is normally done to keep track of projects: have a Gantt chart, on which we collect all the recommendations. As the right hon. Lady is Chair of the Women and Equalities Committee, I wonder if she might look at the report three years on, and commission a further inquiry on where we are on Professor Sarah Childs’ report and how many recommendations have been actioned. People thought the proxy voting was going to be difficult, but it has been as smooth as possible and works really well.

The right hon. Lady’s Committee produced a report on women in the House in January 2017, and I notice that the Government rejected all six of the recommendations in their response in September. One recommendation was that all the parties should aim for 45% of their Members of Parliament to be women. Her Committee also said that section 106 of the Equality Act 2010 should be implemented. The Government responded that they did not want to do that, and that they would rather just talk to the political parties, but I wonder if

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the Leader of the House could take that away and look at it, and perhaps report back at a later date. Many hon. Members have touched on the fact that we are becoming a diverse Parliament. I have to say that 31 of the 52 minority ethnic Members are from the Labour party; 19 are from the Conservatives, one is from the Lib Dems and one from the Independent Group. Exactly half are women, so we are getting it right on that score.

Another important report, “Race in the workplace” by Baroness McGregor-Smith, was published on 28 February 2017. It found that people are still being held back in the workplace because of the “colour of their skin”, which is costing the UK economy the equivalent of 1.3% of GDP a year. She said that if black and minority ethnic people progressed in the workplace at the same rate as their white counterparts, the UK economy could be boosted by £24 billion. The McGregor-Smith review made 26 recommendations. One urged the Government to create a free online unconscious bias training resource that would be available to everyone in the UK, and to develop a simple guide on how to discuss race in the workplace. Two years on from that review, I ask the Government and the Leader of House to assess where we are on that. As Baroness McGregor-Smith said:

“...the time for talking is over. Now is the time to act.”

More importantly, on 28 February 2017, the Government launched a business, diversity and inclusion group to bring together business leaders and organisations to develop ways of removing barriers in the workplace and monitoring employees’ progress. The then Business Minister, the hon. Member for Stourbridge (Margot James), chaired the group. She immediately wrote to the FTSE 350 companies, asking them to drive increased diversity in the workplace and to take up the McGregor-Smith review, but sadly there are still just six women chief executive officers in the FTSE 100 companies. More needs to be done. According to a recent report by Green Park, there are only five BAME CEOs in FTSE 100 companies, and 48 FTSE 100 companies had no ethnic minority presence on their boards in 2018.

Hon. Members will know that we always talk about the gender pay gap, and that is important because this Parliament not only looks at itself but also looks outside. A key figure shows that in 2018 women worked for free for 51 days of the year because of the gender pay gap. We must close that gap as soon as possible. We Labour Members feel that we have a proud record on progressing women’s rights. We brought in the Equal Pay Act 1970, the Sex Discrimination Act 1975, the Equality Act 2010 and the minimum wage, and we introduced Sure Start. Our shadow Cabinet is nearly 50% women, and we hope that that will continue. The important thing is that many people outside this place perhaps cannot afford the things that we can, such as their own workplace nursery. If we were to implement our policies, the extension of the 30 hours of free childcare would make an important difference to women in the workplace generally, whether or not they ended up in here, and families on the lowest incomes would be eligible for additional subsidised hours on top of the 30 hours.

It is vital that we make this place fit for the 21st century for everyone who works here, who visits and who wants to come here. We all want our Parliament and our democracy to thrive, so we should be continuously looking for opportunities to improve it, and I know that all Members, whether new or old, are constantly doing that. As we look for opportunities here, we must recognise that changes can be made through legislation, and that as we change ourselves, we can also change society to make it more equal.

4.34 pm

The Leader of the House of Commons (Mel Stride): I thank all those who have contributed to a valuable and wide-ranging debate, and especially the hon. Member for Lewisham West and Penge (Ellie Reeves) for sharing with us her many ideas, which were clearly built on her experience, in another life before Parliament, of workplace and maternity rights. I also recognise that the hon. Member for Leyton and Wanstead (John Cryer), who is no longer in his place for the very good reasons he gave, and my right hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller) put their names to the motion. In mentioning my right hon. Friend, perhaps I may take this opportunity to thank her for the work that she does as the Chair of the Women and Equalities Committee, and say that I particularly look forward to the prospect of working closely with her in the weeks and months ahead.

As I said, we have had a wide-ranging debate. That is part of the nature of the solutions we all look to when we seek to have a Parliament that is fit for the 21st century and to ensure that the heritage, the wisdom of the ages and the things that make this Parliament work extremely well—there are many; we tend not to focus on them and to take them for granted—are preserved while we move forward positively. That came out in the debate.

As I listened to the various contributions, I noted the wide variety of areas on which hon. Members rightly rightly alluded. The hon. Member for Lewisham West and Penge mentioned the onsite nursery, electronic voting, the recess dates, school holidays and parliamentary Prayers. My right hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke mentioned commuting to Parliament, retention of MPs and staff, proxy voting, mental health, the parliamentary timetable—especially UQs—disability access, restoration and renewal, women in Parliament and ethnic minority portraits.

The hon. Member for Leyton and Wanstead mentioned accessibility and disabled access and the right hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Tom Brake) mentioned job sharing in an intervention. The hon. Member for Bristol North West (Darren Jones) referred to shared parental leave, and I was gratified to learn that his eldest daughter shares the name Ophelia with one of my daughters: it is a lovely name. I will certainly take away from this debate the wonderful image of several Labour Members and the shadow Chancellor failing to fill in a passport form at the Passport Office: I am sure there were very good reasons for that happening on that occasion.

This is an important debate. If our Parliament is not properly accessible, does not project an image that gains the trust and respect of the public or is not truly representative of the country at large, it is a pretty poor state of affairs. I accept that more can be done at every turn. On the point about representation, “The Good Parliament” report has been mentioned. It is an excellent piece of work. It gives the figures: at present, just 32% of Members of Parliament are female, and the figure for the House of Lords is just 27%. On just that one metric, that is clearly not right, and much of the debate has understandably been framed in the context of how we address that particular issue, along with several others.
A number of Members commented on the working hours of the House, which the Procedure Committee had previously looked at in detail. There was a survey on these matters in 2017. The problem, as with so many of these issues, is finding consensus. It is for the House to make these changes, and it is for the House to come together and form consensus on any proposal that may be made.

Several points have made about the organisation of business, and I will briefly touch on one or two of those points. My right hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke raised an interesting idea about the timing of urgent questions, although it contains the nub of the problem with many such ideas. Although it may have some beneficial effects in one respect, it has more negative effects in another. It is about balancing the two. Specifically, if we had urgent questions very early in the parliamentary day, we would still need all the processes that happen in the background leading up to Mr Speaker’s decision on whether to grant an urgent question. That would be shifted several hours earlier and would therefore cause problems earlier in the day, although it would perhaps solve some of the problems for others later in the day. We need to debate and consider such things closely, and I would be happy to sit down with my right hon. Friend to have a closer look at her suggestions, if she would like to do that.

The hon. Member for Lewisham West and Penge talked about the possibility of deferring Divisions late at night, which is an interesting suggestion, and at least one hon. Member talked about the Whips and the valuable role they play in pairing, slipping and so on. They are often the unsung heroes of the parliamentary processes. I say that as a former Whip and therefore somebody who fully grasps, should I say—to be generous—the impact that they can have upon one’s future.

Accessibility is very important. We have a real opportunity with the restoration and renewal project to get some of these things right, and I am very excited about that. The matter was raised by the hon. Member for Lewisham West and Penge, who made some strong points. As the shadow Leader of the House pointed out, it is not just about lifts, ramps and those kinds of things. Often, it is about the acoustics, lighting, security and technology—all these things that make buildings more accessible.

My final point is about technology in this place. There are great opportunities to use technology better here. The hon. Member for Lewisham West and Penge pointed out that we could speed up voting by holding multiple votes at the same time on iPads, provided the votes were not contingent on each other. We have real opportunities to look at using technology to do things differently, although we have to be careful in considering change in those areas.

To respond to the hon. Member for Livingston, I am not particularly drawn to the idea of electronic voting. There are clearly some benefits, but I am very drawn to the idea of Members getting together at a moment in time when conversations with Ministers and others can occur. That is important, and the second point to underscore is that spending the time to get here and do that means that we have to think more about what we are voting for than we would by, alternatively, clicking something or touching a screen.
To be slightly self-indulgent, I would like to float my own idea, which I first floated in 2011. It went absolutely nowhere, because it was obviously far too frightening and radical, but maybe we have moved on. The idea was to have a list of those about to speak up on the annunciator, so that if we knew that the Leader of the House was going to speak in two or three speakers’ time, we could scamper to the Chamber to listen to his pearls of wisdom.

There could be an even greater benefit—I know that I am straying into dangerous, radical territory, Madam Speaker, but let me finish my point at least—because if that information were known several speakers in advance, it could be communicated to the wider world through technology. I could be sitting on a bus and an app could suddenly ping to tell me that the hon. Member for Walsall South (Valerie Vaz) would be on her feet in 10 minutes. I would obviously not dismiss that fact for a second, but would press “Yes, please, I’m absolutely gagging to hear from the hon. Lady”, whereupon she would appear on my screen. I could listen to her or perhaps to my local MP on that bus trip and become more engaged with Parliament and my Member of Parliament. Part of the problem is that we do not know when Members will be called to speak, so that might be one idea.

Hannah Bardell: I have to say that I find myself in agreement with the right hon. Gentleman on that point. I am a member of the Council of Europe, and that is exactly how it operates. We know the order of speakers well in advance and exactly how much time we will get to speak—there is none of this increasing or reducing the time limit; it is much more organised. So he will have my support if he brings forward that proposal.

Mel Stride: I thank the hon. Lady very much, although I am not sure that I have the support of the Chair—I am desperately trying to hold everybody together, which I might just about be able to manage. If the hon. Lady would like to discuss that further with me, I will be happy to do so, although of course I raise these points fully aware that they are far more complicated than the manner in which I have presented them might suggest.

Perhaps I should conclude and leave a minute or two for the hon. Member for Lewisham West and Penge to respond to the debate, if she would like to. Again, I thank everybody for their contributions. I have listened extremely carefully to everything that everybody has said and my door is always open. The mission to reform Parliament is deep and complicated, and it often faces considerable resistance from all sorts of different directions, but the House has my commitment that I am happy to work with Members from all parties to see how we can improve matters.

4.49 pm

Ellie Reeves: I thank everyone who has taken part in the debate. I said at the outset that no single person has all the answers in respect of the modernisation of Parliament, but this afternoon has been an important opportunity to enable Members to put forward their different views on this important matter.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bristol North West (Darren Jones) talked about the role of fathers in all this. It is important that we do not forget the role of fathers, who are increasingly, and rightly, now playing much more active roles in their children’s lives. I will benefit from my husband, my hon. Friend the Member for Leyton and Wanstead (John Cryer), having two weeks of proxy voting when I have our second child. We did not have that when I had our first. Equally, many colleagues and friends of mine in the world of work are able to take shared parental leave with their partners, but that is not open to us. It is incredibly important to look at the role of fathers.

The right hon. Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller) summed up perfectly the chaos of Parliament and what it is like here never to know quite what is going to happen during the day. It is a really unusual way to work and is unique to Parliament. We never quite know what is going to happen, what is going to be on the Order Paper and what questions are going to come up. That not only affects those who have caring responsibilities, but can be detrimental to the working lives of MPs and those who support us in our roles. The right hon. Lady has some fantastic ideas about how we can be clearer about our procedures and how they work.

Several interventions related to the role of staff. I hope that, when we talk about this issue in future, we do not lose sight of the fact that hundreds of people work in Parliament supporting the work that we do. We need to be mindful of their needs and their roles.

The right hon. Member for Basingstoke talked about the need to have a clear plan and procedure. It is important that we do not go away from this debate and never talk about this subject ever again. The last broad, general debate on making Parliament more family friendly was around three years ago. It is important that we keep up these conversations and do not shy away from the ongoing debate about reform.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered making Parliament a more modern, family friendly and accessible workplace.
University Hospital Coventry

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

4.52 pm

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): I am grateful to Mr Speaker for granting me the opportunity to raise this issue, which is very important to my constituents in Coventry South. I am sure it is also important to the constituents of colleagues from Warwickshire.

I thank my colleagues—my hon. Friends the Members for Coventry North East (Colleen Fletcher), for Coventry North West (Mr Robinson) and for Warwick and Leamington (Matt Western), and the hon. Members for Nuneaton (Mr Jones), for Rugby (Mark Pawsey) and for North Warwickshire (Craig Tracey)—for their support. Together, we sent a letter to the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care to request a meeting to discuss these issues, and I am keenly awaiting a response. Many of those colleagues also attended an informative meeting with two surgeons from the hepato-pancreato-biliary unit at University Hospital Coventry, Mr Khan and Mr Lamb. The point of the letter was that we wished to discuss the transfer of the HPB unit, which provides pancreatic services at University Hospitals Coventry and Warwickshire, to hospitals in Birmingham and Worcester.

UHCW has been developing pancreatic cancer services since 1990. It has an excellent team of doctors, specialists, nurses, surgeons and other healthcare professionals, and has completed more than 1,000 major operations and thousands of other therapies. It deploys cutting-edge robotic, endoscopic and radiologic technology to treat patients in Coventry. It takes a patient-centred approach to its service, resulting in excellent feedback from those who have undergone treatment in its care. The success to its service, resulting in excellent feedback from those who have undergone treatment in its care. The success to its service, resulting in excellent feedback from those who have undergone treatment in its care. The success to its service, resulting in excellent feedback from those who have undergone treatment in its care.

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for giving way. He is making a very important point. Does he agree that one of the key issues, as he was just alluding to, is that with any potential loss of service comes not just the potential loss of reputation but what haemorrhaging effect it may have on the rest of this great hospital?

Mr Cunningham: Yes, I fully agree with my hon. Friend. That was one of the points made by the surgeons whom I and the hon. Member for Nuneaton met a few weeks ago.

These proposals stem from the 2014 regional review of services. They are based on the fact that the UHCW was not providing care for enough people, according to the requirements of the Department of Health and Social Care and commissioning guidelines. There were serious capacity constraints at University Hospital Birmingham, leading to multiple cancellations of operations on the day and prolonged waiting times. The process of the review was in fact challenged by a legal notice. The initial proposal stated that UHB and UHCW services should be amalgamated, with the teams working together to develop a model that would provide more efficient services in the west midlands and maintain operating at both sites, with the joint service to be led by UHB.

Mr Marcus Jones (Nuneaton) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing this debate. These are important services that my constituents also access. Clearly, amalgamating these services is of concern to me as it will take away the choice of residents as to whether they want treatment at Coventry or Birmingham. As the population is growing significantly in our area, amalgamating those services may also lead to longer waiting times. Does he agree with me?

Mr Cunningham: The hon. Gentleman makes a valid point, and I will be touching on that a little later on in my comments.

As a bigger hospital in one of the UK’s biggest cities, UHB had a great deal of influence over these discussions. It soon became apparent to the UHCW team that the sacrifices would be one-sided. UHCW felt that it must pull out of the talks, as it was clear that its services would be downgraded and its specialised work would be removed completely—services that it had worked hard to develop. That would be detrimental to the people of Coventry, Warwickshire and beyond.

In November 2018, NHS England served a formal notice on UHCW to transfer specialised liver and pancreas services to UHB in Birmingham or risk decommissioning. UHCW was denied the opportunity to establish the population base required to be an independent centre. There is now a concerted effort from UHB trust management and NHS England to enforce the takeover of the HPB centre at Coventry.

The simple and accepted solution, which is in line with the professional recommendations, is to implement the agreement between UHCW, Worcester Acute Hospitals NHS Trust and Wye Valley NHS Trust to provide the liver and pancreas specialised service at UHCW NHS Trust. It is important to highlight the ongoing capacity constraints at UHB. The realignment from Worcester and Hereford to UHCW would effectively fulfil the required population base to be an independent centre—as per Department of Health and Social Care guidelines—and also reduce the very long waiting times for cancer operations and improve access.

The proposals demonstrate more short-sighted, efficiency-obsessed thinking from NHS England based on the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence guidelines. The findings of the 2015 review, which stated that UHCW’s HPB unit does not serve enough people, totally ignored the good standard of pancreatic care at UHCW. It is of the highest quality and helps to provide patients with the best possible outcomes. NHS England’s proposals threaten the standard of care, which I will raise shortly. The proposals will have a detrimental impact on those in need of this care in Coventry and elsewhere in Warwickshire. Although the 2015 review stated that the HPB unit—

5 pm

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 9 (3)).

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

Mr Cunningham: Although the 2015 review stated that the HPB unit did not reach the population requirements, thousands of lives are saved because of the outstanding service that the team at UHCW have developed. The most obvious problem that my constituents in Coventry South, and people in east Warwickshire, will be faced...
with is geographical, as the hon. Member for Nuneaton said. Many of them will have to travel about 16 miles for treatment, which will be very costly. They will have to take trains, and we all know the problems associated with that. The time it will take patients who currently use the service to travel to Birmingham is unfair. Patient access will no doubt be reduced, as the journey time, as my colleagues from Coventry will be well aware, is about an hour by car and over 80 minutes by public transport. The journey time for patients who currently use the service at UHCW and live outside Coventry, in rural areas out of the reach of public transport, will be considerably longer and the journey will be considerably more expensive. NHS England will directly increase the stress and physical discomfort that patients and family members will have to endure. In addition, once patients have made the hour-long, or hours-long, journey to UHB, there will be a good chance that their treatment will be cancelled or delayed.

University Hospital Birmingham specialises in liver transplants, and it has a success rate that the whole of the west midlands is immensely proud of. Understandably, those operations take priority because of the speed with which they need to take place. Patients at the hospital who have other, slightly less urgent, conditions find that their operations are routinely cancelled in place of a liver transplant. Moving pancreatic services to Birmingham will dramatically increase the number of patients at risk of having their vital operation cancelled. Any patient who suffers from pancreatic cancer, or people who have a family member who has died from this terrible disease, will know that the speed of detection and the speed of treatment are absolutely vital to survival. It is extremely hard to detect, and, as a result, doctors need to act quickly after a patient has been diagnosed. Any delay to operations decrease the chances of survival even further.

The closure of the HPB unit at UHCW also poses a risk to the overall status of the hospital. By closing a key unit, the hospital is at risk of losing its specialist status, and, as a result, being downgraded to a district hospital. That will have a domino effect on the rest of the hospital.

Matt Western: My hon. Friend is making some very powerful points. For me, one of the most staggering facts—I am sure he will agree—is the sheer scale of the number of such operations that are undertaken at Coventry—5,000 over the past two years, I believe. That does not seem a small figure to me. Does he agree that it is surprising that this is even being considered in the first place?

Mr Cunningham: Of course, I totally agree. As I have outlined, it is not about just the volume of operations but their quality, and the skill of the surgeons, the nurses and all the auxiliary staff who do the best that they can for the patients. UHCW will inevitably lose its most skilled doctors and staff, and see the disintegration of the team, service and leadership that the unit has spent so long building.

Finally, I understand that UHCW has written to NHS England outlining its opposition to these proposals—something that I fully support, as I am sure my colleagues here do. It is concerning that UHCW may face these proposals being forced upon it by NHS England, justified by guidelines that have little thought or respect for the quality of care already being provided and the concerns of local people. Not only do these guidelines ignore the quality of care, but NHS England has shown an incapacity to implement them fairly and equally across the country. There was a similar case in Stoke, but rather than close the unit, NHS England allowed it to carry on operating on normal, despite meeting the population requirements. Will the Minister guarantee that NHS England will work with UHCW and support it by allowing it to continue to provide these outstanding services to the people of Coventry and Warwickshire?

5.5 pm

The Minister for Health (Stephen Hammond): I thank the hon. Member for Coventry South (Mr Cunningham) and congratulate him on securing this important debate. I thank the other Members who have contributed. I want to start this debate, as I try to start all debates in the House when talking about the NHS, by congratulating and thanking the staff who work in the NHS—in particular, given the nature of the debate, the staff who work in the hospitals of Coventry and Warwickshire and throughout the west midlands.

The hon. Gentleman made a number of important points that I will try to address. I know that he wrote the Department a letter in May. I will ensure that there is a response to it, but I can tell him now that the response will be that I would be delighted to meet him and the fellow MPs who have signed the letter to discuss its contents and what I am about to say.

The hon. Gentleman raised a number of important concerns regarding the discussions to transfer HPB services from University Hospitals Coventry and Warwickshire NHS Trust to University Hospitals Birmingham NHS Foundation Trust. HPB services treat patients who have disorders of liver, bile ducts and pancreas, including pancreatic and liver cancer. A large volume of HPB services are delivered in local hospitals, but because of their complex nature and the high cost of care, delivery in conjunction with specialist tertiary centres is often necessary.

As the hon. Gentleman indicated, in October last year, NHS England confirmed that no decision had been made to transfer or close the HPB service in Coventry, despite some concerns that national clinical service specifications were not being met. I understand that he is still concerned about that, but I can confirm that there are currently no plans to transfer HPB cancer services away from University Hospitals Coventry and Warwickshire NHS Trust. However, NHS England is actively supporting the trust to work alongside University Hospitals Birmingham NHS Foundation Trust, to ensure that patients have access to safe, high-quality treatment.

University Hospitals Coventry and Warwickshire NHS Trust has said that it is proud—rightly so—of the HPB service, which has excellent outcomes and feedback about the quality of healthcare provided, as the hon. Gentleman mentioned. In 2015, the West Midlands Clinical Senate reviewed the three HPB services across the west midlands and recommended combining them across two sites, because they did not meet national requirements.

The “Improving Outcomes” guideline document specifies that a population base of at least 2 million is required to make a compliant service. Currently, University Hospitals Coventry and Warwickshire NHS Trust treats a population of about 1 million. The guidance also specifies that for a population of around 2 million, around 215 pancreatic and liver resections a year would be expected as a proportion of the population size.
The hon. Gentleman talked about the number of operations and resections done by this unit. Between 2013 and 2018, an average of 80 resections a year were performed in University Hospitals Coventry and Warwickshire NHS Trust. He quoted a rather larger figure, but it was 80 pancreas and liver resections a year. I am happy to discuss with him at the meeting the number he quoted, but it is not one I recognise.

I understand that, over the past two years, teams in both trusts have been discussing how to work together with a view to creating a single point of access and shared multidisciplinary teams for HPB in the local area. Both trusts have agreed that the most complex services should be conducted on University Hospitals Birmingham’s Queen Elizabeth site. However, the trusts are yet to agree on an established definition of the most complex surgery. The clinicians from both hospitals who are currently delivering the service will continue to work together to develop this new combined model of care. NHS England will determine the best way to meet patients’ needs collaboratively, based on specialist surgical skills and the skills that are available at each hospital, as well as on the volume and complexity of clinical cases.

I would like to reassure the hon. Gentleman and, indeed, other Members in the Chamber that I recognise that discussions concerning service change are controversial, and this case is no exception. However, I would also like to reassure hon. Members that all service changes are designed to drive up service quality, meeting the specific requirements of local populations and trying to achieve what is best for specialist service users overall. The hon. Gentleman has set out, with great emphasis, the significant challenges that remain, and it is right that the trusts continue to work together to determine the best method to deliver these highly complex services.

The hon. Gentleman and, I hope, all hon. Members know that cancer is a priority for this Government. Survival rates are at a record high. Since 2010, rates of survival from cancer have increased year on year. However, as we know, there is more to do. That is why, last October, the Prime Minister announced a package of measures that will be rolled out across the country with the aim of detecting three quarters of all cancers at an early stage by 2028.

As part of the NHS long-term plan that we announced in January, the Government have outlined how we will achieve the ambition to see 55,000 more people surviving cancer for five years in England each year from 2028. The Department invests £1 billion a year in health research through the National Institute for Health Research. It spent £136 million of that on cancer research in 2017-18, which is an increase of £35 million on 2010-11. The NIHR is funding and supporting a range of research relevant to liver cancer, including a £1.76 million trial of the hon. Lady’s well-known thermal ablation for colorectal cancer that has spread to the liver and early research on liver resection surgery versus thermal ablation for colorectal cancer, which are currently delivered in University Hospitals Coventry and Warwickshire NHS Trust. He quoted a rather larger figure, but it was 80 pancreas and liver resections a year.

Mr Marcus Jones: My hon. Friend makes an important and valuable point, and as a result of this debate I pledge to write to the hospitals to ensure that the ongoing discussions between the various parties are as inclusive as possible. As I said earlier, I will happily meet him, the hon. Member for Coventry South, and other Members.

Stephen Hammond: My hon. Friend is kind and generous in giving way, and I thank him for the commitment he has made. There has clearly been little public engagement, but that is what we need with regard to any changes that are made, so that the public can understand the rationale behind these changes. I am aware of one person who has been chasing information about this issue, but they have hit a brick wall.

Stephen Hammond: My hon. Friend is assiduous in representing his constituents and making his points. As I have said, these discussions have not yet concluded, and it would be hugely inappropriate for me or any politician to try to prejudge the right clinical outcomes. When those clinical outcomes have been worked through and the discussions finalised, I have no doubt that University Hospitals Birmingham and the Coventry and Warwickshire Partnership NHS Trust will wish to publicise the result of those discussions as widely as possible.

Mr Jim Cunningham: Following the intervention by the hon. Member for Nuneaton (Mr Jones), the Minister mentioned a wider discussion and involving the public. We met some representatives, including Mr Peter Burns, who is the former chair of the local chamber of commerce and a very influential person. Such organisations, as well as other public bodies, must be brought in and consulted. Will the Minister agree to do that?

Stephen Hammond: It would have been inappropriate for me to be involved in clinical discussions, but I hear what the hon. Gentleman says. Before we have that meeting, I will write to him on that point. I hope that we will have a meeting relatively soon, so that we can finalise what should be done.

Service change is often controversial. We should rightly scrutinise any service change, but that should be based on patient safety and the right clinical outcomes. I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising this matter and continuing to hold us to account, and I look forward to meeting him and other hon. Members to discuss the issue further in the near future.

Question put and agreed to.

5.17 pm

House adjourned.
Westminster Hall

Tuesday 4 June 2019

[MR PHILIP HOLLOBONE in the Chair]

Telephone and Online Scams

11.30 am

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): I beg to move, That this House has considered telephone and online scams.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone, and to have the first debate back after the brief Whitsun recess. It is good to see the Minister in her place. I am grateful to her; I understand that, due to personal circumstances, she is covering for the Minister with responsibility for this area, the right hon. Member for Wyre and Preston North (Mr Wallace). I am also grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Torfaen (Nick Thomas-Symonds), who is covering for the shadow Minister for policing, my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield, Heeley (Louise Haigh). It is a covering event with responsibility for this area, the right hon. Member in her place. I am grateful to her; I understand that, due to personal circumstances, she is covering for the Minister with responsibility for this area, the right hon. Member for Wyre and Preston North (Mr Wallace).

Many might say, “Don’t be stupid. Anyone can tell the difference between a scam phone call or email and a legitimate communication,” but the truth is that, with the increasingly sophisticated methods being employed and the vulnerable people being targeted, we cannot rely on that assumption, and the statistics show that. Picture an 80-year-old living alone in an area of high crime. They get a call from someone purporting to be from the Department for Work and Pensions inquiring about a problem with their pension. They rely on their pension to get by and they would rightly be declared a crime wave. That is why the issue is so important. It is not going away. If we manage to hold back the tide of scams out there today, the scams of tomorrow could be completely different, why the issue is so important. It is not going away. If we manage to hold back the tide of scams out there today, the scams of tomorrow could be completely different, and we have to be prepared for that.

One constituent even approached me recently about a scam involving emails asking for information being sent from my own parliamentary email address. That issue has been referred to the House authorities. Most recently, just last week another constituent emailed me saying that a false email had come with my name on, but that was not from my email address. The constituent rang my office, querying why I was using a different email from my normal parliamentary one. Thankfully, they had had correspondence with me before. Even as Members of Parliament, trusted as we are with handling the personal information of constituents, our names are being used. I only knew about it because of that particular constituent, who was savvy enough to realise that the email was not mine, but a fake one, which was asking for personal information, including their national insurance number and their bank details. None of us are immune from the issue.

On the one hand, it is positive that clearly not all the public think of politicians as untrustworthy if they are putting us front and centre in pushing a campaign. But on a serious note, it shows how concerned we should be about the tactics that criminals are using. In the era of fake news, where there is an ever-important need to look over anything we see or hear with a critical eye, the hidden fraudsters who seek to steal our money online will adapt their methods in ways we least expect. That is why the issue is so important. It is not going away. If we manage to hold back the tide of scams out there today, the scams of tomorrow could be completely different, and we have to be prepared for that.

How big a problem are we talking about? Age UK found that up to 5 million people over the age of 65 believe that they have been targeted by a scam. It also found that single, older people are far more likely to respond to a scam than younger, married people. As many Members will know, around half of over-75s live alone. That just illustrates how elderly people are particularly vulnerable to this menace. That, in part, is where the real injustice lies with our current approach. What would our response be if 5 million older people had been referred to the House authorities. Most recently, just last week another constituent emailed me saying that a false email had come with my name on, but that was not from my email address. The constituent rang my office, querying why I was using a different email from my normal parliamentary one. Thankfully, they had had correspondence with me before. Even as Members of Parliament, trusted as we are with handling the personal information of constituents, our names are being used. I only knew about it because of that particular constituent, who was savvy enough to realise that the email was not mine, but a fake one, which was asking for personal information, including their national insurance number and their bank details. None of us are immune from the issue.

The statistics show that the over-65s are a staggering three times more likely to be targeted by a scam than be burgled. Scams pose less risk for the criminal than standard burglary, with the number of potential victims rising exponentially as a result. Half a billion pounds was lost by UK banking customers due to scams in 2018.
Remarkably, the charity Think Jessica estimates that as few as 5% of scam victims report the crime committed against them. That fact alone tells us that the statistics could well be the tip of the iceberg. But unlike icebergs, the issue is not melting away. In fact, the figures from all agencies, including the Government, suggest that the issue is getting worse.

Figures from the Office for National Statistics show that in 2018, the number of reported fraud incidents rose by 12% on the previous year, equating to an astonishing 3.6 million individual cases. Sometimes that might be a fiver or a tenner stolen, but more often than not we are talking about much greater sums of money or personal information that can never be recouped. While £5 or £10 might not seem like an awful lot of money, for someone on universal credit or, worse still, appealing a universal credit decision, that £5 or £10 could be an awful lot of income for their household. Likewise, once people have become victims of fraud, it can be incredibly difficult for them to recoup the money they have lost. I recently helped a small business in my constituency get back nearly £20,000 that it lost in a scam after a long battle that the constituent had endured with his bank. That just shows how this crime can have a prolonged and significant impact on victims, and that impact is not only financial; it also puts strain on family and business. It simply is not good enough.

Just as the last Labour Government were tough on the causes of crime, it is now time we got tough on the scourge of hidden crime. Put simply, an epidemic of scams is sweeping across the country, and I know that south Wales is a particular hotspot. Every week in my inbox and during advice surgeries, I am contacted by constituents who have been targeted by the increasingly sophisticated techniques that I have outlined. Whether in written form, online, via text message or over the phone, the sophistication of the targeting seems to know no bounds. The criminals who sit behind a computer or a phone and think they are immune from the law need to be exposed as the hidden fraudsters they are. The very fact that many scams are targeted at the elderly and the vulnerable shows just how low these standards’ ability to tackle scams.

As with everything involving technology, there is no silver bullet to stop this problem, but there are things the UK Government can do to stem the tide and deter other freeloaders from seeking to cash in on our communities. We first have to look at the police’s approach. Tackling fraud online and via the telephone is not a strategic policing priority. The police watchdog, Her Majesty’s inspectorate of constabulary, found only two months ago that the public are being left at risk because forces do not consider fraud to be a priority. One officer told the inspectorate that, despite people being more likely to fall victim to fraud than any other crime, it was falling behind other offences because it does not “bang, bleed or shout”.

The inspectorate’s report warned of a “disjointed and ineffective” response across England and Wales because of the lack of a national strategy. I therefore ask that the Home Office ensures that tackling such fraud becomes a strategic policing priority across all our forces. At a national level, will the Minister—perhaps she will pass this on to the Minister responsible—update Members on the progress made by the joint fraud taskforce? As I have mentioned, the ONS has found that fraud is increasing, not going down. Members across the House therefore need to know what the taskforce is achieving.

On a more positive note, I was pleased to see the introduction of the pension cold-call ban in January. I warmly welcome that effective step from Ministers. Although I recognise that the effects might not yet have been assessed, I am sure that all Members would appreciate it if the Minister provided an early indication of the effectiveness of the policy. Likewise, given that we know that fraudsters often adapt their tactics when avenues are closed off, the Government need to outline what they are doing to prevent other fraud—for example, online scams—from increasing following the cold-call ban. As I have said, the backdrop of austerity cannot be ignored when addressing this issue. The cuts to local government across England and to the Welsh block grant have undoubtedly had an impact on trading standards’ ability to tackle scams.

I want to praise the work of my local trading standards team for its work to raise public awareness of the threats posed by scams, particularly through its Friends Against Scams initiative. I also pay tribute to my local force, South Wales Police, which has done a huge amount to try to support constituents who have been scammed. There is a wider issue, in that once someone has been scammed, particularly if they are older, vulnerable and living alone, there is an element of embarrassment and they feel they cannot report it. South Wales Police has done huge amounts of work locally and across the region to try to reassure people that the scam is a crime and they deserve justice.

It cannot be denied that trading standards could do much more to tackle the problem if they had more resources. What representations will the Minister make to the Chancellor in advance of the spending review to free up funding to get to grips with the issue? The sheer scale of the crime means that one agency cannot tackle it alone. Increasing resources will mean that trading standards can work in a much more joined-up way with other agencies, such as the police and local adult social care services.

Although public awareness tactics have been used in the past, there is a need for a much more far-reaching and targeted campaign. Simply using Facebook adverts or leaflets in Government-owned buildings will not work. There is an irony, in that while many of those targeted are over 65, there is an issue about digital inclusion, access to broadband across the United Kingdom, and access to computers and the digital technologies through which advertising campaigns could work, yet lots of the people targeted do not have access to those services, so we arguably need to raise public awareness through television and other sources. We need to reach out to our communities, particularly our elderly residents, with the latest information on what types of scams are out there and how they can prevent themselves from becoming victims. The Government must see that as an investment in our communities against a problem that will only worsen if we allow the epidemic to continue to take hold.
Nobody likes the feeling of being violated by a criminal. No matter what the scale of the crime is, the feeling is still there to an extent, and yet there is a silent crime wave sweeping across the UK that very few people talk about, and the Government are not doing nearly enough to address it. It is time we got real with these hidden fraudsters and prevented them from inflicting any more damage on the communities we represent. Whether it is a family member, a friend or someone living down the street who we do not know, nobody deserves to have their money or personal information stolen from them. It is time we shouted louder and stemmed the tide. Whether it is £20 or £20,000, the Government must show today that they are serious about tackling the criminal black hole being inflicted on people’s finances. Warm words and sympathy are welcome, but they do not resolve the problem.

We are going backwards on tackling this problem. We need to get on the front foot and ensure we are ahead of the criminals. The word “scam” has become synonymous with something we cannot control of late. Today the Government—I know the Minister will do her best—need to step up and show that that is simply not the case.

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): I remind Members that the debate can last until 1 o’clock.

11.44 am

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I am grateful to the hon. Member for Ogmore (Chris Elmore) for securing this extremely important debate. As he has rightly set out, the growth in recent years of online and telephone scams, which are often combined, is a deeply troubling development. The impact on individuals is colossal.

I can think of three examples that I am working on in my constituency. An early-retired teacher was recently scammed into investing £25,000 into a fake bond through an incredibly plausible copied website of a reputable bank. A young man who works in the arts was recently scammed out of an amount just shy of £50,000; he was presented with what was apparently a bill from Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs, and was told that if he did not pay, he could be subject to prosecution. A couple who had no conventional pension were convinced by a combination of telephone and online scamming—their computer, but not their online banking operation, was hacked—into transferring nearly £200,000, which has utterly destroyed their retirement. Those are three instances of bright, not terribly elderly people being scammed by sophisticated criminals. It has had a massive impact on those people’s self-esteem; the hon. Member for Ogmore rightly pointed out the sense of violation felt by victims of these scams. They have had their lives trashed, and, in one case, their retirement turned upside-down. The impact on the victims of online and telephone fraud is colossal, and we need to be aware of it.

My quick assessment of the people I am supporting through my constituency office is that there has been a roughly £1 million of personal fraud perpetrated on individuals across the age ranges. Almost all the cases focused on online fraud. As the three cases I mentioned have not been resolved, we have been successful in getting significant amounts of compensation—full compensation for some—for victims of fraud in my constituency, but in the other cases, there has been nothing as yet, which is completely unacceptable. The hon. Member for Ogmore rightly pointed out the rise in fraud and the amounts of money involved. In the first half of 2018, there was some £95.7 million of online fraud.

I want to draw a correlation, which is not complete, but is hugely significant, with the loss of bank branches and physical banking opportunities in our communities. My constituency of Westmorland and Lonsdale has pretty much the same geographical area as Greater London, though it has a slightly smaller population. Of all our towns and villages, only two retain physical bank branches. In the past three or four years, we have seen the closure of branches in the villages and towns of Milnthorpe, Grange, Ambleside, Sedbergh, Kirkby Lonsdale and others. To a degree, bank branch closures have come about because banks have responded to our changing banking habits. I understand that, but they have pushed it. It makes life a lot easier and cheaper for the banks if we completely relate to them online. It saves them a fortune. Think of the hundreds of thousands of pounds that banks will have saved, in my constituency alone, in wages, rent and overheads by closing down branches. When they have owned the buildings, they have had a huge cash sale capital receipt, and the money they have saved has gone into their profits.

There is also a correlation between the increase in online fraud and the decrease in the number of bank branches in our communities. Recklessly, banks have put customers—particularly, but not exclusively, older ones—at greater risk, while saving millions upon millions of pounds. I do not say that there is no business case for some branch closures, but the banks have been reckless, and have done nothing—or very little, having left it very late to do anything—to help victims of the increase in fraud as people who feel less comfortable going online have become more likely to feel obliged to do so. The banks have increased risks to their customers—our constituents—while saving themselves a fortune.

Authorised push payment scams are key to what we are talking about. We should welcome the voluntary code that came in just a few days ago, which I hope will result in significant changes. At the moment, if someone has been the victim of an unauthorised scam—in other words, if someone else has got hold of their details and taken money out of their account—nine times out of 10, or perhaps 99 out of 100, the bank will compensate them. If, however, someone has been fooled into moving some money out of their account themselves, as in the three instances I just related, nine times out of 10 they are on their own. The authorised push payment scams voluntary code ought to mean that future victims of authorised push payment fraud will be compensated.

Of course, all the people I have spoken about—indeed, all the people we will talk about today—are historical victims. Whether they were scammed in the last few weeks or the last few years, they stand to get not a penny of compensation. It is very good to see the Minister in her place. I really want her to focus on what we will do to help people who have been victims historically, which is everybody apart from those scammed in the last week. I ask her to take action so that the code can be applied retrospectively to all victims of authorised push payment scams.
The hon. Member for Ogmore rightly talked about the need to catch the criminals who do something so utterly despicable. My police force in Cumbria is under enormous resource constraints, but is doing a good job, in so far as it can, in providing support. In recent days, local media have reported on the relatively small number of police available to respond to incidents in our community. One of the reasons for that is that many have been taken off to do this kind of work. It is important to recognise that our police force must be given additional resource to catch those who are guilty of such crimes, and to support victims.

Chris Elmore: I thank the hon. Gentleman for taking part in the debate. I am in the police service parliamentary scheme. What struck me when I met one of the victims of such fraud is the sheer scale of the paperwork that the police have to complete. They told me that that is because the back-office functions have been cut, as there is no funding, which creates additional pressure. The police want to deal with these cases. The hon. Gentleman is right that there are not enough officers to do so, but it is also about the paperwork involved, because the fraud is so complicated. The police have to have an hour’s discussion with the person who has been defrauded. Does he agree that there has to be specific funding, not just for trading standards but within the police, so that they can tackle the problem as broadly as possible?

Tim Farron: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for raising an important point. One issue is resource; another is time and expertise. We are not dealing with stuff that is simple to fix. He is right that one of the impacts of, let us be honest, the underfunding of our police service in the last few years has been that police commissioners seek to protect the number of visible police officers, for good reasons and because it is politically sensitive. How do they then save money? They get rid of all the admin staff. Police are therefore unable to focus on frontline policing, because they are taken off to do the admin work that the back-office staff used to perform.

Banks are saving perhaps hundreds of millions of pounds by closing branches and changing the way in which we relate to them, but they thereby put our communities at greater risk of online and telephone fraud. There is a real opportunity for the Government to take—not in a punitive way—a small fraction of the money that they are going to use to visit relatives and do what they wanted to do when they had more time to spend together. I must highlight that when this lady went down to her bank, the staff were incredible. It is good to underline it when banks step in and do the right thing. In this case, Santander and Nationwide must be thanked; they were able to track and trace some of the money, and the lady got some 75% of it back. I put on record my thanks to them for what they did.

Clearly, the scammers have upped their game. Their scams do not involve emails from so-called Nigerian princes, kings, and retired army generals, telling people, “You’ve just won all the money in the world, which you never thought you’d have, and you’ve inherited land. All you have to do is send your bank details, and we’ll transfer the money and everything else to you.” It is much more sophisticated today; we now have home-grown, plausible, knowledgeable thieves, able to prey on those who have worked hard and deserve to live their life free from such vile thieves.

I know another lady who was scammed. She is separated and divorced. The person who scammed her was aware of her personal circumstances because she has a Facebook account. Whenever we put something on Facebook, we innocently tell the world where we are. People know whether we are separated or divorced, and when they read that story, they quickly assume that we are vulnerable, which gives them another opportunity for a scam. The scam involved transferring money to a person from eastern Europe or wherever—he certainly sounded English, according to the lady. They had a Facebook arrangement and made telephone calls, but they did not meet. Appointments and liaisons were made, but there was always a reason he could not make it. The signs tell us that something was not right about it. He purported to
be serving in the forces, but when the address that he
had given was checked out, it was false, as were the
details of his Army record. Everything about him was
false, but she was vulnerable and innocently lost money
to his scam. We need to be careful about that.

My local paper, *Newtownards Chronicle*, regularly
publishes stories to highlight scams, whether online or
telephone frauds, as do the police. The scams are on a
large scale. HMRC reported that, last spring, it received
some 250,000 reports of tax scams—nearly 2,500 a
day—and asked for more than 6,000 websites to be
deactivated. Some 84,000 customers lost money. About
a month or two ago, HMRC warned in the press about
people telling others, “Pay your tax by this time”, and
some people were caught as a result.

Last year alone, customers lost tens of thousands of
pounds, but only a fraction of that amount was refunded
by banks. The new code, which we all know about,
should mean that more money will be reimbursed. The
refund will come from a central pot in cases where
neither the bank nor the customer was to blame. Eight
banks, covering 17 brands, have committed to implement
the code immediately: Barclays; HSBC, including first
direct and M&S Bank; Lloyds Bank, including Halifax,
Bank of Scotland, and Intelligent Finance; Metro Bank;
Nationwide; Royal Bank of Scotland, including NatWest
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Bank of Scotland, and Intelligent Finance; Metro Bank;
Nationwide; Royal Bank of Scotland, including NatWest
Bank of Scotland, and Intelligent Finance; Metro Bank;

Not all banks have signed up, however, and that
needs to change. In the Minister’s response, which I
know will be forthcoming and helpful, perhaps she can
give us an idea of what has been done to encourage
other banks to sign up and be part of the initiative. We
need to drive change and the way forward from this
place and from this debate, and I look to the Minister,
as I often do, to understand the Government’s plans for
the line of action to be taken, legislation, and the
methodology to ensure that scams and scammers can
be stopped.

What more can we do to tackle the issue? In large
part, it needs to be tackled through conversation and
coverage. We need to encourage people to have
conversations about phone scams with all family members,
not simply those whom we believe to be vulnerable,
although they also need to be told. It is surprising how
many people can be caught out unwittingly. Hon. Members
present, and people further afield, may remember the
old days when front doors were left open, probably with
the key inside. The money was in the wee tin in the
kitchen, but it was never touched—that is how it was.
Life has moved on. Today, thieves are willing to rob,
pillage and steal, and they have different ways of doing
it, which we need to understand.

The message must be clear. People should always
check with their local branch before they give out any
details. They should pop down and ask the staff on
the front desk what is happening—or if they do not have a
bank to pop down to and ask, as the hon. Member for
Westmorland and Lonsdale said, they should certainly
phone. The staff can let them know if there is an issue
with any of their accounts. A genuine caller will understand
and encourage the need to check with the bank.

I usually go on holiday every second year, and we
have paid the money this year. As an example of how
banks can do it, when the money is paid out from my
credit card account, my bank phones me up and says,
“This is a larger amount of money than we normally
have coming through your bank account. Can you
confirm it?” Some banks, and some debit and credit

card companies, are proactive, as they should be.

I am not a soap watcher—I do not watch “Coronation
Street” or “Emmerdale”, or any of those sorts of things—but
my wife is, and millions of other people watch, too.
As I understand from my wife, not from my own
experience, they do storylines about different issues.
There is an opportunity to use some of those soaps to
raise awareness by carrying a hacker storyline. That
would make more people aware of what is happening
throughout the country. We need to understand that it
is happening to people of all ages, not simply to the old
and infirm; a 20, 25 or 30-year-old can be scammed as
well. The hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale
referred clearly to young and old.

We need to set aside more funding to enable the
police to be more effective in tackling such fraud, as the
hon. Member for Ogmore said, and as others will. A
business in my constituency caught online fraud while it
was taking place, but when it rang its bank and the
Police Service of Northern Ireland, they did not have
the expertise to stop and trace the fraud. That should
not be the case. The necessary expertise, experience and
wherewithal must be in place.

The scams that happen in the constituency of the
hon. Member for Ogmore or the Minister, or in my
constituency or yours, Mr Hollobone, are the same
scams that take place all over the United Kingdom. It is
important that the police forces in all four regions
interact with one another about scams. Perhaps that
already happens, but if it does not, it needs to. Every
region of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and
Northern Ireland needs to exchange information about
new scams, so that others know, and so that the knowledge
goes down through the system.

We must have experts available to do what needs to be
done—not simply to stop transfers midway, but to trace
those who are carrying them out and ensure that they
get the maximum sentence for their fraud. The sentences
for fraud and for stealing from people need to reflect
those criminal activities.

The lady about whom I spoke at the beginning of my
remarks has been irrevocably changed by the experience;
someone who was outgoing and confident has lost
trust, not in her bank, but in herself. The effect on
people is not just monetary or financial; it is deeper
than that. There are long-term mental and emotional
effects. We need to ensure that support is available to
tackle the crime, catch the criminals, stop the scams and
help the victims.

12.8 pm

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): I
thank the hon. Member for Ogmore (Chris Elmore)
for securing the debate and for his comprehensive
exposition of the matter.

The cost of scamming in our society is undoubtedly
huge and cannot be counted only in pounds, shillings
and pence, although the financial cost is significant. As
we have heard, scamming affects all sections of our
communities, but the elderly and other vulnerable
members of our communities are at particular risk. The Office for
National Statistics predicts that by 2030, the number of
elderly people living in our communities will increase by 34% from 11.6 million to 15.7 million, and the number of people living with dementia is set to increase from 850,000 to 2.1 million across the UK.

We should not forget that the impact of dementia and other impairments makes vulnerability much more pronounced and the ability to target an individual repeatedly much more possible. The hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron) discussed the impact of scams, and it is worth noting that victims of scams are nearly two and a half times more likely to require increased care provision or to die within two years of being scammed. It has also been reported that victims often experience a rapid drop in their physical health after realising that they have been scammed.

Those who perpetrate scams use increasingly sophisticated techniques to scam their victims, in some cases repeatedly. Trading standards, although already hard-pressed, is working on the frontline to do all that it can to safeguard the vulnerable. The most sinister, cynical and cruel aspect of scamming is that it is a criminal activity that targets the most vulnerable in their own homes. The one place where any of us should feel safe becomes the setting for people being conned out of their money, via sales scripts, data collection and sometimes even targeted mail.

The most common telephone scams are cold calls. I am delighted that, despite an unnecessary two-year delay, the Government have finally implemented my ten-minute rule Bill on nuisance calls in full, because there is a huge overlap between cold calls and nuisance scams. The adoption of that Bill is a very good start, but more needs to be done.

As the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale set out, the impact of scams goes far beyond the financial loss. It is emotional and psychological, and has been shown to have an impact on our wellbeing. The hon. Member for Ogmore pointed out that scams can ruin lives and split up families, with the consequences lasting long beyond the initial trauma of financial loss. Moreover, even when financial losses are comparatively low, scams lead to a breakdown in consumer confidence.

The full effects of the harm caused are difficult to estimate, as—all too frequently—only around 5% of victims report that they have lost money. The average age of a victim is 74 years old and the losses average about £1,000, but many lose hundreds of thousands of pounds. Victims of scams often feel embarrassed and are afraid that their families will judge them to be no longer capable of living alone. For that reason, scams may not be reported, which leaves the victims open and vulnerable to repeat scams. Some people find it extremely difficult even to admit that they have been the victim of a crime.

The scale of the problem and its associated costs are huge. Alongside that, we know that trading standards is struggling to cope, although the work it does is worthy of high praise and demands our respect. I also want to highlight the excellent work carried out by the Credit Industry Fraud Avoidance System, which works to prevent fraud and financial crime through the sharing of confirmed fraud data. Last year, CIFAS prevented more than £1 billion in fraud loss by sharing data across sectors. Its data shows that in my constituency of North Ayrshire and Arran, 278 frauds took place last year and there were 103 victims of fraud. That is a mere snapshot of the true level of fraud, which is likely to be much higher because of under-reporting.

Scams do more than rob people of their money. They rob them of their confidence; their belief in themselves and in their judgment; their self-esteem; their willingness to trust people; and the help others may be able to offer them. Ultimately, they rob them of their ability to live full, happy, independent lives. Research carried out by Which? shows that what makes us vulnerable to scams is that we are all overconfident about our ability to spot one. Ironically, that overconfidence makes us all the more vulnerable. The gap between confidence and ability is dangerous.

What can we do? I absolutely agree with the suggestion put forward by trading standards that financial institutions should recognise that clients with dementia are by definition more at risk of being scammed and that measures need to be taken to protect that group as a duty of care—I would argue that it should be a legal duty of care. Those who are diagnosed with dementia live with a cognitive impairment, and that must be recognised as we seek to protect them.

The sharing of personal details and information with other organisations should of course require a clear opt-in, as opposed to an opt-out, which is an important tool in the fight against scamming. The normal default position of charities and other organisations should be that personal details are not passed on or shared. Although there is legislation in place, I am not convinced from the evidence I have seen that it is being as rigorously adhered to as it should be.

It is worth noting that about 850,000 people in the UK currently live with dementia and the figure is expected to rise to more than 1 million by 2025. Sadly, the scammer does not see people who need help and are vulnerable; they simply see rich pickings. It is the duty of society to do all it can to protect these vulnerable, elderly people.

Customers should be able to formally notify their bank in writing if they feel at risk and request that all transactions over a certain amount to new payees have a 24-hour delay before being processed. The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) discussed his experience of that, and it is time that all banks had a legal duty to do the same. It would give time for the proposed transaction to be challenged and would potentially stop scammed money from leaving a scam victim’s account.

Of course, it is not just the elderly who can be rich pickings for scamming. In 2015, almost 24,000 people aged under 30 were victims of identity fraud, up from 15,766 in 2014 and more than double the 11,000 victims in that age bracket in 2010. Fraudsters get hold of their victim’s personal information—such as name, date of birth, address, their bank and who they hold accounts with—in a variety of ways, including through hacking and data loss, as well as by using social media to put the pieces of someone’s identity together.

Some 86% of all identity frauds in 2015 were perpetrated online, and that figure is rising. Interesting emerging evidence suggests that younger people report losing money to fraud more often than older people as scams move online. Older people are more reluctant to report being scammed, but when older people are victims of scams, their losses tend to be much greater.
Society, the Government and industry all have a role in preventing fraud. Our concern is that the lack of awareness about identity fraud is making it even easier for fraudsters to obtain the information they need from social media sites. It is important that we all check our privacy settings today and think twice about what we share on social media.

The hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale talked about the closure of bank branches, which is an important point. There is no doubt that banks are trying to force those of us who have chosen not to bank online—I include myself—to do so, not because it is convenient for us but because it is convenient for the banks. I for one will not bank online and I urge those who are not comfortable doing so to similarly resist that pressure.

We have heard today about some eminently sensible and straightforward measures that could be taken by having a more strategic approach. Banks having safeguards for vulnerable people could do much to protect those who are most at risk of scamming—the elderly and vulnerable in our communities. We should also reach out to those of all ages who use social media but do not have the information they need to protect themselves from identity fraud. We could do more to give people information, with education campaigns to better inform people how they can take some responsibility and some simple steps to protect themselves, as the hon. Member for Strangford suggested.

I urge the Minister to reflect on the suggestions that have been put forward to tackle this problem and to confront the situation whereby people are robbed in their own homes—an experience that they subsequently find deeply scarring. The effects are far-reaching. Let us do more to protect the victims of scams—we can do more. The scammers and fraudsters are very creative; we have heard some examples of that today. They are evolving their techniques. We need to be creative and evolve our measures to deal with them. In the end, we are all at risk, so we need to work together to protect our communities. I am very interested to hear what ideas the Minister is going to take forward.

12.19 pm

Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under you in the Chair, Mr Hollobone, in the first debate back after the short recess. I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Ogmore (Chris Elmore) for raising this crucial issue and for his thoughtful and powerful speech, which made a compelling case for greater action by the Government on telephone and other types of scamming.

The scale of this problem is truly breathtaking. Age UK has estimated that up to 5 million people over the age of 65 believe they have been targeted by a scam. South Wales, the part of the country that my hon. Friend and I represent, is a hotspot for these issues. The hon. Gentleman represents a very rural constituency where I am sure that would be a particular issue, but it applies across all parts of the country and is something that we really need to tackle.

I welcome the work of the joint fraud taskforce, which I look forward to hearing more about from the Minister in due course, and the ban on pension cold-calling that came into effect in January. However, I note that Her Majesty’s inspectorate of constabulary said there was a “disjointed and ineffective” national strategy. Therein lies an enormous challenge for the Government in pulling together so many different aspects of a strategy and enforcing it around the United Kingdom.

The hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron) spoke powerfully about the cases he has seen in his constituency office, and about a crucial issue that should not be missed in this debate: the future of bank branches. At the last general election, my hon. Friends and I stood on a manifesto that sought to change the framework of legal obligations to be considered when closure decisions come to the fore. Nobody is saying that there are not business cases. Footfall is of course important—nobody is denying that—but there are two things to consider. First, the wider social impact of closing branches is often missed. Secondly, if the current rate of branches disappearing from the high street continues, we will end up with deserts in different parts of the country because there are no branches nearby. The hon. Gentleman represents a very rural constituency where I am sure that would be a particular issue, but it applies across all parts of the country and is something that we really need to tackle.

The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) spoke movingly about his constituent, a schoolteacher who clearly fell victim to a fraudster who was extremely credible, as I am afraid they too often are. The hon. Gentleman also highlighted a further issue, which I will come back to in a moment: once someone has fallen victim to a scam, what awareness is there of the remedy and the compensation that can subsequently be recovered? In some cases, it is sadly not.

The hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson) was absolutely right to highlight the increasing risk to vulnerable people. When we talk about some of the statistics on scams affecting people over 75—I will do so in a moment—we must not forget that anyone of any age can fall victim to such scams. She was right to point out the risk to young people from different types of online scams, including identity fraud, and the importance of being cautious about what is shared on social media and knowing how that information can be used by people who wish us harm.

In its most recent statistics on crime in England and Wales, the Office for National Statistics identifies a worrying trend in these types of cases. The number of fraud incidents, 3.6 million, was up 12% on the previous survey year, driven in part by a 27% rise in consumer and retail fraud. It is vulnerable people who are targeted. Age UK has identified that single older people are more likely to respond than married people, and half of all people over 75 live alone. In addition to that vulnerability, the people who perpetrate such crimes are becoming more menacing and sophisticated in how they set out to defraud people.

A number of aspects of this issue demonstrate the need for a laser-like focus from the Government. There is the classic lottery scam, where people are told that they have won something when they have not. There are Government scams, where groups essentially pretend to be the Government and use that badge of credibility to...
[Nick Thomas-Symonds]

carry out their crime. There are also security scams, which were mentioned in earlier speeches, whereby people are contacted by someone pretending to be their bank or some other trusted source.

What are we to do? We have to raise awareness, but it has to be done in a robust, targeted and smart way. People who are victims of scams need to report them, and a number of the speeches picked out that it is often difficult. People perhaps feel embarrassed and do not want to say they have been a victim of this particular type of confidence trick. As my hon. Friend the Member for Ogmore pointed out, that relates to how people are treated when they do speak up, and it is important that best practice on being sensitive to the relevant issues is spread among our police forces.

There are other, practical things that people can do. For example, the Royal Mail can stop unaddressed mailings in the post if people register for that service. There is also the issue of data protection, which is covered by both the Data Protection Act 2018 and the General Data Protection Regulation. The Information Commissioner’s Office, to which I often direct constituents who are worried about what has happened to their data, is an oversight body. If people are concerned about the retention of their data, they should be encouraged to go to that scrutiny body.

The hon. Member for Strangford raised the question of what remedies there are when someone falls victim to one of these confidence tricks. There is the Consumer Credit Act 1974, and people often forget that credit companies are jointly and severally liable even if the breach or misrepresentation is by the person doing the selling. The Act applies only to sums between £100 and £30,000, but that is none the less one remedy. There is debit card chargeback and the authorised push payment voluntary code, to which the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale referred. I praise the work of consumer groups on raising awareness of those remedies. It is something that we really need to focus on, so that people are aware that should they fall victim and lose substantial amounts of money—one of the cases mentioned in the debate involved around £50,000, which is a huge amount of money—that there are routes they can go down to try to recoup at least some of their losses.

There was an excellent Library briefing for this debate, and I pay tribute to the Library staff who produced it. The Government really need to look at how they collect statistics in this area. Where they do collect statistics, is there a way of breaking them down into types of scams? Are they online or telephone scams? I have raised this point with Ministers before, and I appreciate that there is always a balance. They cannot collect every single statistic, but if statistics were collected on what the fastest-growing risk was, the Minister would be more able to target Government policy to reduce it.

It is crucial that we bring together a robust strategy all over the country. We need more resources for our law enforcement agencies, but they also need a consistent strategy that pushes back against the fraudsters who target our constituents. To use the words quoted by my hon. Friend the Member for Ogmore, the victims might not “bang, bleed or shout,” but great misery is certainly caused to them by this crime. The Government have to rise to the challenge.

12.29 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Victoria Atkins): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I thank the hon. Member for Ogmore (Chris Elmore) for securing this debate. He and other hon. Members have campaigned consistently on this extremely important subject. I thank all hon. Members who made contributions. As the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) said, this issue affects each and every constituency, and we all know someone, whether personally or professionally, who has been a victim of a scam or an attempted scam.

The examples that hon. Members gave show the range of scams that criminals can pursue and the range of people who can be victims. We rightly tend to focus on the most vulnerable—particularly the elderly, who are exploited by fraudsters because of their age and, the fraudsters assume, their frailties—but as the hon. Members for Strangford and for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron) highlighted, these scams are not restricted to the most vulnerable. They are now so sophisticated that they can take in people who would ordinarily think that they are able to withstand such efforts. The methods that fraudsters use include playing a recording of a call centre in the background so it sounds like they are calling from a large call centre, which reassures the victim that the call is legitimate. There are huge challenges, not just for law enforcement, which must respond robustly, but for us as individuals. We must ensure that we are as knowledgeable as possible about these scams to protect ourselves, those we care for and those we think may be vulnerable. I will go into that in a bit more detail in due course.

The Government take this harm extremely seriously. Fraud is the second most prevalent crime in England and Wales. The crime survey estimates that there were 3.6 million frauds in 2018. Victims can suffer serious financial and emotional harm, and the money that fraudsters make can fund other serious organised crime. Although we have made substantial progress, the Government’s efforts to tackle scams and fraud in general are focusing on three areas: the policing response to fraud, reducing vulnerabilities, and the care and service that victims receive.

We are clear that the law enforcement response to fraud must improve. The previous Home Secretary, my right hon. Friend the Member for Hastings and Rye (Amber Rudd), requested that Her Majesty’s inspectorate of constabulary and fire and rescue services conduct an inspection of the police response to fraud because we wanted a much clearer view of how fraud is being investigated and what improvements are needed. The inspectorate’s recent report highlighted key weaknesses in the police response, suggesting that significant improvements are required to ensure the efficient and effective operation of the current fraud policing model. In practice, that means local and, increasingly, regional investigations, supported by national functions.

The hon. Member for Strangford rightly said that fraudsters do not recognise geographical boundaries. On his point about the UK-wide response, we very much recognise the need to develop a national policing strategy for fraud, which will address, for example, how the Police Service of Northern Ireland can link with the overall national strategy. The City of London police is the national lead force for fraud and serves as a national...
centre for the collection and sharing of intelligence across the four regions of the United Kingdom. We very much take on board the hon. Gentleman’s point about the cross-border implications for the internal borders in the United Kingdom.

The inspectorate’s report and 16 recommendations demonstrate that the policing response to fraud must improve. My right hon. Friend the Minister for Security and Economic Crime, who apologises for not being able to be present today, takes this matter extremely seriously. He expects that the report will be taken seriously by chief constables and police and crime commissioners alike. We are working with the police and other law enforcement agencies to take forward those recommendations and challenge fraud at a national, regional and local level. The shadow Minister rightly asked about the statistics. I will take that point back to the Minister for Security and Economic Crime.

Let me turn to reducing vulnerabilities. In addition to improving the police response to fraud, we must also address the vulnerabilities in systems that fraudsters exploit if we are to make the UK a harder target for fraudsters. The hon. Member for Ogmore gave the example of a fraudster citing the DWP in a scam that one of his constituents suffered. We recognise that the Government and law enforcement must work closely with the private sector, as well as with each other. Agencies such as Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs are leading the way in the fight against online and phone fraudsters and are working relentlessly to close tax scams and raise awareness.

In the previous financial year, HMRC reported more than 12,000 malicious websites for takedown, recovered hundreds of misleading HMRC-branded domains, initiated the removal of hundreds of phone numbers used to perpetrate HMRC-related phone scams, and increased education efforts to ensure that the general public are aware that people may use HMRC’s or other agencies’ branding to try to extract their much-needed and carefully saved savings and income. Those education campaigns are being run by the media, television and newspapers. In 2016, HMRC identified a significant increase in the number of customers receiving malicious HMRC-branded texts. With the phone industry, it piloted award-winning controls that resulted in a 90% reduction in reports of such scams. The lessons learned from that are being scaled into a solution for the whole of the United Kingdom. As was reported at the weekend—hon. Members mentioned this—HMRC is deploying new controls to put an end to fraudsters spoofing the tax authorities’ most recognisable helpline numbers.

Nuisance calls are a source of extreme irritation for many, but for the most vulnerable they can also be incredibly stressful and harmful. We have taken a range of actions to reduce the number of nuisance calls. We have banned cold calls from personal injury firms and pension providers, as hon. Members noted. The hon. Member for Ogmore asked for an update. I will ask the Minister for Security and Economic Crime to write to him about that. It is very early days, but hopefully we can provide some information to him.

We have also introduced director liability for nuisance calls, and we are supporting national trading standards in rolling out call-blocking devices to vulnerable people. Members of Parliament have a real opportunity to help our constituents to understand the ways in which scams can operate and what we can do to protect ourselves against them. I recommend the Take Five to Stop Fraud scheme—a joint awareness campaign run by the Government and UK Finance, which provides simple advice to prevent people from falling victim to scams. The key message is that people should take their time when making a new payment, because fraudsters will try to rush them, as some of the very sad examples highlighted in this debate show.

The response to scams and fraud in general requires a collaborative, innovative response, because as we catch up with criminals, they will find other ways of exploiting technology to present new challenges and find new ways to steal people’s money. That is why the Government created the joint fraud taskforce: to better protect the public and businesses from fraud, reduce the impact of fraud on victims, and increase the disruption and prosecution of fraudsters. We continue to work with the taskforce to build on successful initiatives, such as the banking protocol—it has been discussed today—which is a code of practice to help banks to identify victims and alert law enforcement. It has prevented more than £48 million from falling into the hands of fraudsters and has led to more than 400 arrests.

We also welcome the publication of the voluntary industry code. It marks a significant step forward in the fight against authorised push payment frauds, which involve tricking customers into sending money to fraudsters via a payment service provider. To give an idea of the scale of the task, in the first half of 2018, consumer losses from APP scams amounted to around £145.4 million, of which just under £31 million was repaid to customers. The code will ensure that sending and receiving payment service providers will take steps to protect their customers, including with procedures to detect, prevent and respond to APP scams, with greater protection for customers who are considered vulnerable to that type of fraud.

The hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale asked about the retrospectivity of the code. Again, I will raise that with the Minister for Security and Economic Crime. There are no plans to force banks to apply the code retrospectively, but there are certainly no rules or laws in place that prevent banks from making good-will payments. We also encourage victims of APP scams who have not been compensated by their bank to lodge a complaint with the financial ombudsman.

As the hon. Member for Strangford said, the code is voluntary, but to reassure hon. Members, the current signatories of the code cover approximately 85% of APP scams, and the Payments Systems Regulator, which leads the development of the code, actively encourages banks to sign up, as does UK Finance. In addition, the Financial Ombudsman Service will take the code into consideration when determining cases, regardless of whether the bank in dispute has signed up to the code.

On the other work that the payments industry does to prevent APP scams from occurring in the first place, the confirmation of payee service is the industry-agreed way of ensuring that names of recipients are checked before payments are made. Essentially, it is an account name checking service that can help to avoid the misdirection of payments. The industries developing the service say that it can be implemented by payment providers during the course of this year.
Regulators and industry are taking further action to increase payment security and reduce fraud via stronger customer authentication. From 14 September this year, rules supplementary to the second payment services directive will apply, meaning that payment service providers such as banks will be required to apply more security measures to large transactions, and customers may be asked to provide more credentials. That could reduce some types of fraud by up to 30%.

It is also right that we look at the service provided to victims of scams and fraud. Two economic crime victim care units have been established to better identify vulnerable victims of fraud and ensure that they are provided with the right level of support. That includes practical advice, support and guidance to help victims to cope and to prevent them from again falling victim in future. The units have been trialled in the Greater Manchester and West Midlands Police force areas, and an assessment will be completed this year to help to measure the impact of the scheme.

With funding from the Home Office, National Trading Standards has piloted local multi-agency hubs to ensure that victims of fraud receive support from the local agency best able to provide it, whether that be the police, social services or charities. At the risk of boasting about my own county, in Lincolnshire—one of the pilot areas—the local police, National Trading Standards and a health trust have worked in partnership to train 1,000 health and social care professionals to identify and support older people who have been, or may be, the victims of doorstep crime and scams.

A strategic action plan has been developed by Victim Support and National Trading Standards, with Home Office support, to ensure that the service received by fraud victims is rapid, appropriate and consistent, and takes into account any specific needs that they may have that might make them particularly vulnerable or susceptible to fraud. The joint fraud taskforce is working on a technical and regulatory framework to ensure that more fraud losses can be returned to victims. Work is also being undertaken to test the technology that can trace the movement of funds back to their source. The next step will be for banks to agree ways of operating that allow for the freezing of funds, a system of dealing with disputes and, ultimately, the return of stolen funds.

We all take this threat very seriously. The responsibility is shared by all concerned agencies, both in the public and private sectors, which is supported by civil society. I am extremely grateful to the hon. Member for Ogmore for providing the opportunity to discuss this fraud, innovative ways of tackling it, and ways to ensure that the Government’s steps are monitored and have the impact that we wish them to have. This is a piece of work that, I am delighted to say, many colleagues across the House, not all of them here today, have shared in common to ensure that the financial and social damage that such invasive crime inflicts on some of our most vulnerable citizens is tackled and stopped.
Suggitt’s Lane Level Crossing

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): This debate will consider the important subject of the closure of Suggitt’s Lane level crossing in Cleethorpes. I call Martin Vickers.

1 pm

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the closure of Suggitt’s Lane level crossing, Cleethorpes.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. As you say, this debate concerns a very important subject. Although it relates specifically to Suggitt’s Lane crossing, it should be considered in the broader context of the accountability of Network Rail, a nationalised company that, on this issue, seems to be unaccountable to the Secretary of State and its sponsoring Department.

In theory, Network Rail can be held to account in a number of ways. The Office of Rail and Road monitors health and safety, has a role in determining the public funding that Network Rail receives and sets certain objectives. Andrew Haines, the company’s chief executive, is personally accountable to Parliament for Network Rail’s use of taxpayor’s money, and the Secretary of State for Transport holds some power over the board’s leadership and management of the business, but accountability on issues that can have a significant impact on local communities seems to be totally absent. For it to be so independent that it is wholly unaccountable and free from adequate scrutiny on such matters as the Suggitt’s Lane issue clearly is unacceptable. If Network Rail is able to dismiss the representations of local residents, councils, Members of Parliament and even the Secretary of State, surely it is time to revisit its structures. That should not and cannot be allowed to continue.

Until recently, the level crossing allowed hundreds of local residents every day to pass quickly and easily to the north promenade of the east coast’s premier seaside resort, without the hassle of a bridge. Let us consider the figures: according to Network Rail, 570 pedestrians and cyclists use the crossing each day. That figure undoubtedly will be higher at weekends and during holiday periods, but even assuming that it is a constant use by members of the public for 150 years, there seems to be no right of way, so Network Rail has a new footbridge was erected at Brigg station. No access for the disabled and those with prams and the like. If it did occur to Network Rail—I am sure it did—that a bridge somewhere down the line would pose a great inconvenience for local residents, it chose to dismiss the issue. It is the lack of disabled access that has been the concern that constituents have raised most frequently with me in recent weeks.

Over the last few months, I have been in frequent contact with Network Rail in writing and in meetings, but no progress has been made. I have raised the matter in the House on five occasions in the last couple of months, and have secured the support of the Under-Secretary of State for Transport, my hon. Friend the Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough (Andrew Jones), who is in his place, who asked Network Rail to review its decision. He and I met Network Rail representatives on Monday 8 April to make the case further. They agreed to consider reopening the crossing while they review their plans. I presented a petition to the House, organised by Cleethorpes-based DN35 CrimeWatch, which was signed by over 4,000 local residents who oppose the closure.

Late in April, I had the opportunity to make representations directly to Andrew Haines, the chief executive of Network Rail. I pressed him on the situation and argued that, at the very least, the crossing should be reopened while a review takes place. He promised that he would personally look into the issue, which he duly did and wrote to me to say, “No change.” In a matter of days, I discovered that Network Rail had erected a permanent barrier at the crossing to make it impossible
for pedestrians to cross. Clearly, it did not consider the recommendation of reopening very seriously, or in any great detail.

The response from Network Rail to date has been disappointing, but I remain committed to the campaign, and will continue to support local residents, who I am glad to see in the Public Gallery, in their objections to this heavy-handed and ill-considered decision. According to Robert Wainwright, head of level crossings at Network Rail, the UK has one of the best level crossing safety records in Europe. That is especially remarkable as our country has one of the most intensively used rail systems in the world.

Five years ago, the Select Committee on Transport, of which I was a member at the time, produced a report on level crossing safety. I draw hon. Members’ attention to two of its recommendations. The first stated:

“We recommend that Network Rail address criticism of its apparent preference for footbridges as replacements for level crossings and explain what assessment it makes of the impact on disabled people of replacing level crossings with footbridges rather than underpasses.”

The second stated:

“We are concerned that the proposed appeal mechanism for closure orders, using judicial review, will be out of reach for ordinary people and, increasingly, local authorities. We recommend that the DfT consider using alternative dispute resolution, such as mediation by the Office of Rail Regulation”.

Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby) (Lab): Did the Committee not also state in its recommendations that it considered there was merit in applying a public safety test to any diversionary route that may result from the closure of a level crossing? Is the hon. Gentleman aware of whether Network Rail followed that recommendation in this situation?

Martin Vickers: I certainly recall that point. I have to confess that I do not know whether it has been followed through. We will wait to see whether the Minister is able to confirm that.

I understand that in the past decade, Network Rail has made a great deal of effort to improve the safety of level crossings. Initiatives such as the introduction of level crossing managers and ever-improving technology have proven successful in improving behaviour at level crossings. From a practical perspective, technology is probably the most effective means of changing outcomes. It is a huge factor in the reduction of deliberate misuse and human error across the country. I see no reason why Network Rail could not implement technology to aid pedestrian decision making at Suggitt’s Lane. Perhaps it could include supplementary audible warnings and overlay miniature stop light solutions.

In September 2013, the Law Commission published a report and a draft Bill containing a series of recommendations aimed at improving the safety and regulation of level crossings. Its suggestions included providing tools to support health and safety regulation, including level crossing plans and enforceable agreements between railway operators and other duty holders, and giving the Secretary of State the power to issue directions if necessary. Those proposals, if properly implemented, have the potential to make level crossings much safer, so that Network Rail feels less incentivised to close them on a whim.

Clearly, a vast number of alternatives to closure are available to Network Rail. I have no doubt that this decision was taken as it was the easiest and cheapest option. There was no need for Network Rail to take into consideration the trouble the closure would cause elderly and disabled residents, given the lack of powers for any person or institution to hold it to account. That is unacceptable, and it must change.

Installing a modern footbridge with disabled access at Fuller Street would prove extremely expensive. Whether the funding for that came from the owner of the bridge, North East Lincolnshire Council, or from Network Rail, it would be public money. I question whether public money should be spent on eliminating a theoretical risk at Suggitt’s Lane when there are thousands of level crossings, many with trains passing at 125 mph, where the money could be better spent.

I referred to the 15 near misses to which Network Rail referred. Remember, that is 15 near misses in 10 years, during which time more than 2 million people will have passed over the crossing. On 9 April, Mr Ian Stuart from the Rail Accident Investigation Branch emailed one of the local campaigners, Lynn Sayles. He wrote:

“We have reviewed our records from when we were established in October 2005 and have found details of only one Incident at Suggitt’s Lane level crossing, which occurred on 13 January 2011. The circumstances of this particular case were unclear, but involved an individual being found with an injury in the vicinity of the crossing. However, there was no direct evidence that the injury had actually been caused by a train. The RAIB received no formal notification from the industry about the accident and the circumstances could not be substantiated so no further action was taken.”

Only one of the 15 near misses was considered significant enough to involve the RAIB. That is one near miss, in which the circumstances could not be substantiated, against more than 2 million crossings. Why close the crossing and cause massive inconvenience on the basis of those results?

Of course people should not trespass on the railway, and of course people should not act foolishly, but, sadly, some do. We all suffer to some extent as a result, but in this instance the massive inconvenience simply is not justified. Anyone who is determined to trespass on that stretch of railway can go along to Cleethorpes station at any time of the day or night and wander down the platform and on to the track.

I urge Network Rail to do the right thing: to admit that it has not fully appreciated the strength of local feeling, that full, proper and meaningful consultation should take place, and that while those discussions happen, it should reopen Suggitt’s Lane crossing. My plea to the Minister is that he uses his good offices to find a solution.

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): I am pleased to call Melanie Onn, but I will need to call the Minister no later than 20 minutes past 1 o’clock.

1.14 pm

Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby) (Lab): I thank the hon. Member for Cleethorpes (Martin Vickers) for generously allowing me a few minutes to add my voice to those of the campaigners who crowdfunded to get here to participate in the debate, such is the strength of their feeling.
It is really important to acknowledge that any death on our railways is a tragedy. Of course that must be avoided, so I completely understand the desire to close dangerous level crossings, particularly where there is a real risk to life. However, this issue is not about a genuine risk; it is about a perceived risk. It is about an attempt to solve a problem that does not exist—an attempt that has caused huge disruption and upset to residents across north-east Lincolnshire.

The risk is actually worse now that people with bicycles and people with mobility problems have to cross a bridge that is not really suitable for that. In fact, young William, who has joined us in the Gallery, recently fell down that bridge trying to take his bicycle across it. Has Network Rail given that any consideration? I suspect not, because now it has displaced the risk, it has become somebody else’s problem.

Having been asked about risk assessments, Network Rail conveniently says there is no need for it to do them because this is not a public access route. However, it drafted factually incorrect risk assessments to support the decision to close the crossing, as the hon. Member for Cleethorpes said. Network Rail says there is no public right of way, but it has previously written to members of the public and local authority planners in support of Suggitt’s Lane crossing becoming a right of way.

As recently as September 2018, Network Rail confirmed in writing that there were no plans to close the crossing, yet within just three months, without providing any details or timeframe to the public, and without even responding to the former council leader’s concerns, it closed it. After 150 years, despite the fact that more than 500 people a day use the crossing, Network Rail has walked away, saying it has no need to take any account of the impact it has caused to the local community.

We heard about the RAIB’s assessment. Is there something in that that we need to consider? If there have been so many near misses that Network Rail considered to be so important, why did it not report them to the RAIB? Network Rail has published various documents about the risk of the crossing, which are completely inconsistent. One gives the crossing a risk status of D2, but another puts it in the extremely low M13 category. The recent risk assessment was produced and published just four days before the closure, but that was months after the hon. Member for Cleethorpes, the leader of the council and I were notified in writing of the decision. What on earth was the point of doing that assessment if Network Rail had no need to do risk assessments in the first place?

Network Rail says it has given safety talks to schools. It can provide no evidence of that. It says it participated in local safety events. It holds no records of those. It says it has communicated with local residents and businesses about safety issues. It has no evidence of those letters. How is it possible that a public body can be so utterly incompetent, seek embarrassingly and obviously to pull the wool over the eyes of members of the public, and be in a situation where it not only ignores its own mission statements about accountability but has no transparency whatsoever in its decision making? It has left campaigners, such as those in the Gallery, with just the very expensive route of a judicial review.

There is a similar situation with the Angerstein Wharf crossing in Greenwich. Network Rail has had the good grace to listen to the leader of the council, the MP and the community, and to delay the closure of that crossing. If that is possible for Greenwich residents, why is it not possible for Grimsby and Cleethorpes residents? I think Network Rail hopes to get away with this, but this is a warning. The campaigners, who are here today, are dogged and tenacious. They will not give in. Network Rail might hope for an easy exit, but that will not happen.

I echo the comments of the hon. Member for Cleethorpes. I urge the Minister to use his considerable influence on Network Rail to insist on a proper consultation, and to recognise the hard work of campaigners such as Lynn Sayles, Robert Palmer and Councillor Debbie Rodwell, among others, as well as the impact on local businesses, disabled people, families and the elderly, who all rely on this crossing.

1.20 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Andrew Jones): It is always a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Cleethorpes (Martin Vickers) on securing this important debate. We should also recognise and thank the local residents who have come down to observe the debate for their perseverance in raising this important issue—and their perseverance in getting into the building when it is pretty lively outside. I will talk briefly about the railway more broadly and level crossings in general before addressing Suggitt’s Lane.

We must recognise that rail is a critical part of our national economic infrastructure, offering safe journeys to work and facilitating business and leisure travel. It also moves millions of tonnes of freight around our country, relieving congestion on our roads. We are seeing a real boom time in the rail industry, with passenger numbers having doubled since privatisation in the mid-1990s.

I want to see more progress made, with that success built on by improving and extending services wherever viable, as well as ensuring that we see more frequent and better services to places such as Cleethorpes, which is a point my hon. Friend has made to me many times. He is a champion of this issue, particularly on a direct service to London, which was the subject of our last meeting. However, the growth in rail and rail freight comes at a cost: a more heavily used network can bring greater safety risks to passengers and the public, particularly at stations and level crossings, and that leads to difficult choices for Network Rail to make as it seeks to deliver faster and more frequent services; of course, it must not compromise on safety while doing so.

There are no easy solutions. I recognise the responsibility that Network Rail has in making operational decisions as the duty holder for Britain’s railway infrastructure—indeed, Ministers cannot overrule decisions made on safety issues—but the point raised by Members about accountability was well made. I will take that away from the debate.

There are 7,000 level crossings across our mainland rail network, with different types of crossing based on the different levels of risk. These range from open passive crossings, with no barriers or gates, for where trains are infrequent and speeds are low, to crossings with full barriers monitored by CCTV and with telephones.

Level crossings of whatever type are safe when used correctly. Absolute safety may be an impossible goal—we should aim at it, though—but it is important that the
[Andrew Jones]

right type of crossing is used at a location to achieve safety with minimum delays to the surrounding community, whether on foot or on wheels. The factors that are taken into account include the speed and number of trains; the volume and type of road traffic; the nature of private use; the number of pedestrians; and the location itself. Clearly decisions have to be made locally, because what is appropriate for a quiet country road is totally different from that for a busy urban area.

Ninety-six per cent of accidents at level crossings are considered to be caused by either driver or pedestrian action, whether intentional or unintentional. Safety, therefore, clearly can be compromised in this area. Statistics show that the safety record of level crossings in this country is among the best in the world, but we always seek ways to improve safety.

Level crossings now represent the single biggest source of risk of train accidents—those with the potential for multiple deaths. I therefore agree with Network Rail’s initiative to minimise the number of level crossings on the network, but that must be done in a proportionate way that takes people with it. Network Rail has to focus on improving the operation and maintenance of level crossings; a risk assessment programme to identify where additional action may be needed, which certainly includes the safety impacts of any diversionary routes; measures to promote the safe use of level crossings; and, where feasible and appropriate, closing crossings altogether if the opportunity arises.

Let us focus on Suggitt’s Lane, which Network Rail told me it decided, with a heavy heart, to close permanently. That is in line with its statutory duties as the managers of our rail infrastructure. On the legal position, Suggitt’s Lane was established as a private level crossing to serve a local fishing business in, I believe, the 1860s. That business has ceased, and there was no public right of way at that crossing; it was just for the business. That position was confirmed in discussion with North East Lincolnshire Council and in Network Rail’s own investigation.

Let me explain what brought Network Rail to its decision. It observed a number of potentially fatal incidents at the level crossing, including young children crossing unattended, people walking on the tracks and motorcyclists using the crossing. My hon. Friend and the hon. Member for Great Grimsby (Melanie Onn) highlighted the 15 near misses recorded in the past 10 years, which are in addition to those examples. Evidence suggests that other incidents may have gone unreported.

Melanie Onn: Does the Minister accept that only one incident has been recorded with the RAIB, and that was back in 2005?

Andrew Jones: Yes.

Martin Vickers: Will he acknowledge that it would be wasteful to spend any public money on that project, because the risks are so minimal? The money should be spent where there is more risk.

Andrew Jones: We have obligations to keep our rail network as safe as possible. The definition and calculation of risk is a key factor in deciding where money is spent. It is important that we have a dialogue between the local council and Network Rail to look at all the options and come to an effective permanent solution, which can and must be found. That could mean work at Fuller Street or other areas, but I want to ensure that people are talking locally about a local solution to a local problem.

The challenge has been well articulated by Members. Network Rail will have been following the debate, and I will ensure that it picks up the content of our discussions and addresses the concerns that have been expressed. I will write to both hon. Members and, through them, to their constituents.

We have a difficult situation where a local community has been affected by an organisation charged with safety seeking to improve safety. In this case, we are not seeing what an agreement might look like. That is of some regret, but we must work harder to try to reach a solution that all sides will be happy with, keeping the community together and making sure that people can travel safely in and out of Cleethorpes.

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 10(6)).

1.30 pm

Sitting suspended.
Trade Union Access to Workplaces

Faisal Rashid (Warrington South) (Lab): I beg to move.

That this House has considered trade union access to workplaces.

Working people in the UK can thank our trade unions for fighting to give us the minimum wage, parental rights, holidays and sickness pay. With nearly 6.5 million members in the UK, trade unions are our 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. This role has never been more critical than it is today, with in-work poverty on the rise and zero-hours contracts widespread, but a barrage of anti-trade union legislation over the past decade has meant that workers have found their ability to organise and take industrial action to challenge these injustices greatly restricted.

Under existing legislation, huge multinational companies such as Amazon and McDonald’s can employ legions of low-paid, insecure staff, often in terrible working conditions, all while turning record-breaking profits. It is boom time for large multinational companies, but their success is not passed down to employees. With British workers facing an uncertain and exploitative job market, trade unions are the perfect tool to make these workplaces fairer.

Ged Killen (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Lab/Co-op): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this important debate. Does he agree that it is a real pity that some big employers do not see the benefit of having an organised workforce, which facilitates better industrial relations, improves dialogue between employers and employees, and is better for staff morale and for keeping staff turnover low?

Faisal Rashid: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point, which I will come to later in my speech. If employers look after their employees and they are happy, then they are more productive; in the end, everybody wins. That was a great point.

It is no exaggeration to say that working conditions at large multinational companies are, at times, reminiscent of the deplorable practices of the 19th century. Workers have recounted having to urinate in bottles for fear of being disciplines for a toilet break and heavily pregnant women report being refused permission to sit down for a break during 12-hour shifts. How can we allow this to happen in the UK in the 21st century? I have spoken to countless trade union officials who tell me that, despite the widespread desire for improved rights and conditions at work, efforts to unionise staff in such workplaces are often fruitless.

In large part, that is because there are currently no rights of access for trade unions to enter the workplace and speak to workers for the purposes of recruitment. Workers at Amazon have had their shifts patterns interrupted and randomised simply to prevent them from talking to union officials on the way into work. Union representatives visiting branches of McDonald’s across the UK speak to workers about the benefits of joining a trade union are routinely thrown out of stores, with their presence reported to senior regional managers.

When I raised these issues in Parliament several weeks ago, both Amazon and McDonald’s responded by denying that these practices were taking place in their stores. McDonald’s stated: “We strongly dispute the notion that we are asking people to leave our restaurants based on their membership of a union. If anybody comes into a restaurant with the sole intention of disrupting our people while they work, or customers while they eat, we would ask them to leave regardless of their reason for causing disruption.”

Does that attitude not sum up the problem with the current legislation? The crucial work of our trade unions is simply a nuisance to these companies and is getting in the way of their exploitative practices and profiteering. The current laws simply let them get away with it.

Laura Smith (Crewe and Nantwich) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that our highly restrictive trade union laws and low collective bargaining coverage have helped to make the UK one of the most unequal countries in Europe and the OECD in terms of income inequality, and that guaranteeing trade union access to all workplaces would be a moderate and practical step in addressing these issues?

Faisal Rashid: Absolutely; that is an excellent point. I could not agree more.

Union members from the Bakers, Food and Allied Workers Union have recounted stories like that of Mohamed’s, 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 could plan his life. Because of those efforts, he was informed by the management that he was banned from every McDonald’s store in the area. I note that in its statement McDonald’s did not dispute that account.

In its response, Amazon stated: “If you want a true assessment of our working conditions just register for a tour at one of our fulfilment centres.”

A registered, company-sanctioned tour—effectively a corporate PR exercise—would hardly paint an accurate picture of working conditions at Amazon. Let the figures speak for themselves: from 2015 to 2018, a shocking 600 ambulance calls were made to Amazon warehouses. I have visited an Amazon warehouse in my own constituency in the past; the technology on show was indeed very impressive, but that hardly gives an accurate account of what it would be like to work a 12-hour shift in the warehouse. Nevertheless, I am happy to take Amazon up on its offer of another visit. Would I be able to bring representatives from the GMB union with me? Until now, many of them have consistently been denied access to the workplace.

It is not just Amazon and McDonald’s; these practices are widespread, particularly in poorly paid jobs. In its recently published report on InterContinental Hotels Group, Unite the union documented a workplace 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
routine denial of the right to freedom of association and have stood little chance of exercising their right to collective bargaining.

**Rachael Maskell** (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): I am grateful to my hon. Friend for calling this debate. While making the case about large employers, will he acknowledge that there is a lot of exploitation of workers by small employers, particularly bullying and harassment, and that they also shut their doors to trade unions? That is to the detriment of small employers, as well as to the detriment of their staff.

**Faisal Rashid:** I thank my hon. Friend for that brilliant point. It works for all stages in every sector, regardless of the size of the business. If large organisations practise fairly, it will filter down, especially through subcontractors. It is the responsibility of large businesses to show smaller businesses what they are doing. If they follow the right practices, that will filter down to subcontractors. Perhaps larger businesses could have some kind of contract to make sure that their subcontractors look after their employees in the same way as they do. Large businesses have to set a precedent.

Union members are vulnerable and live in fear of reprisals from their employer. Bupa is one of the 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 with staff and members regarding union rights and representation.

During 2017 and 2018, Unison North West regional officers were banned from every Bupa care workplace, despite assurances that visits could be conducted at the employer’s convenience and with due regard to operational and safeguarding concerns and priorities. I have just mentioned what McDonald’s said about disruption, but unions do not want to disrupt the business at all. They give adequate time before they come, and that is all I am asking for in the legislation. Of course I am pro-business and I support great businesses, but not at the cost of poor workplace conditions for employees.

I am sure I do not need to remind the Minister that the UK is a signatory to the European convention on human rights, article 11 of which 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.”

Does he not agree that the examples I have listed constitute a flagrant violation of that right? If so, what does his Department intend to do about it?

I do not want to use this debate simply as an opportunity to criticise existing practices, but to propose a way forward. I hope the Minister will listen to my proposals, because it does not have to be like this. 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. As I said, I am pro-business and I want to see our businesses flourish, but that should not come at the cost of dignity and respect at work. An alternative is possible.

We can look to places such as New Zealand for inspiration, as well as for evidence that the legislation that I am proposing works. Under the Employment Relations Amendment Act 2018, trade unions there have far greater access to workplaces. Workers in New Zealand can speak to union representatives in their place of work, which has led to higher union membership, higher wages, and fairer and more just workplaces.

Under this legislation, all that is required is that the union provide a short period of notice that it will be visiting the workplace, allowing for management to add the extra staff member needed for the duration of the visit. The situation is beneficial for all involved: disruption to the business is kept to an absolute minimum, while workers’ legal and human right to join and form a union is properly adhered to.

**Ruth George** (High Peak) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making an excellent case. Does he agree that that access is even more important when individual workers are undergoing disciplinary or grievance procedures, and that we need to see a full right to representation for workers in those procedures? At the moment the employers have an unequal force of arms, but resolving these issues could make workplaces better for all employees.

**Faisal Rashid:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right. I was a union rep at my workplace before I joined Parliament, and the number of cases in which I represented my colleagues is unbelievable. There are a number of things that union reps can achieve, working with the employer and of course the workers, and that is crucial.

With the success of New Zealand in mind, I want to see similar legislation adopted in this country. Last month, I presented a private Member’s Bill to that effect, which seeks to remove a number of restrictions on trade unions’ conducting business in workplaces. I have received a lot of support for the Bill from hon. Members, over 50 of whom were willing to co-sign it. However, to date I have not been supported by a single Conservative or Liberal Democrat MP.

Arguments against increasing the collective bargaining power of working people have long been discredited. It is a myth that strong trade unions drive down profit. If strong trade unions drive down productivity, why has the UK long suffered from a productivity gap despite having the most restrictive trade union laws in western Europe? In truth, a happy, well-respected workforce is also a productive one, but the stories I have heard from union officials paint the opposite picture: too many people in this country feel exploited and dispensable at work.

If we are to transition away from a low-wage, precarious economy, increasing the collective bargaining power of our workers is critical. That is why I am fighting to improve trade union access to the workplace. We need strong trade unions and a better deal for working people.

4.45 pm

**Justin Madders** (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Ms McDonagh. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Warrington South (Faisal Rashid) on securing this debate and on talking eloquently about this important issue. I am proud to be a co-sponsor of his private Member’s Bill that he talked about.

As we know, the right to join a trade union is a basic democratic right. Trade unions play an invaluable role in ensuring that justice is served, defending their members’ workplace rights, pay, and terms and conditions. As I
have said many times in this place and will always say, the best thing anyone can do to protect themselves at work is to join a trade union. I draw the House’s attention to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests and my membership of GMB and Unite.

As my hon. Friend said in his excellent speech, the European convention on human rights provides that everyone has the right to form or to join a trade union for the protection of his or her interests. Given that, we might think there would be no need to introduce his Bill to remove restrictions on trade unions conducting business in workplaces in the UK, but sadly both the law and the culture in this country place little emphasis on workplace protection and do little to support or respect it.

Far too many people experience insecurity, uncertainty and exploitation at work. As we have heard, in-work poverty is on the rise and zero-hours contracts are widespread. Anti-trade union legislation introduced by the Government has actively sought to clamp down on trade unions and to diminish the voice of ordinary working people. In my opinion, that is based on a ridiculous and outdated view of trade unions and their role in society.

As we heard, there are 6.5 million trade union members in the UK. Every hon. Member present today will have constituents who are members of trade unions. They are ordinary men and women who want to organise themselves collectively to strive for better working conditions, and who can argue with that as an aim? We should be supporting them in their efforts to improve working conditions, not attempting to thwart them. As my hon. Friend said, a happy workplace is a productive workplace; it is good for employers and good for the economy.

We should therefore be saddened to hear that research by the TUC has found that one in three workers do not feel comfortable approaching managers about a problem with work, that more than one third do not feel that they or their colleagues are treated fairly and that nearly half say that their line managers do not explain their rights at work. Trade unions were founded exactly for those reasons, to fight for the rights of every worker.

Union representatives in the workplace can inform workers of their rights, help to ensure those rights are enforced and provide workers with a collective voice in negotiations with employers. They provide the safety net we all need. That is why it is vital that trade unions should have a legal right of access to workplaces in the UK.

Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): Does my hon. Friend accept that one of the fundamental problems now, with so many workers working for small and medium-sized companies, is the lack of a place to meet? Often, workers just need to discuss some of the issues, but they have no opportunity to do that, and that makes it difficult for them to join a trade union. Does he agree that that is something we could look at seriously?

Justin Madders: My hon. Friend makes an interesting point. I think there is more we can do to meet in the electronic sense, online; there can be more discussion forums that way. The old workplace messes are a thing of the past, but we can improve things in that way.

My hon. Friend the Member for Warrington South spoke about various examples around the country where employers have prevented unions such as the Bakers, Food and Allied Workers Union, Unison, GMB and the Union of Shop, Distributive and Allied Workers from accessing workplaces. We have heard about some of the largest employers in the country, including McDonald’s, Amazon and Bupa, actively seeking to prevent trade union activity through restricting access, banning visits or manipulating shift patterns to prevent opportunities for engagement. That is a shameless way to behave and is ultimately self-defeating.

In my area, trade union recognition in the construction industry has been a particularly hot issue recently. We have a lot of industrial construction, but for some reason some of those involved refuse to engage with trade unions on recognition issues, to their detriment. National agreements are important for pay, training and safety—all things we want to see in the construction industry.

Danielle Rowley (Midlothian) (Lab): My hon. Friend mentions the construction industry. I have a constituent who found that she is blacklisted not only from a particular company but from the whole sector and is therefore unable to get employment in the field she is an expert in, all because of her trade union activity. Does he agree that that has to be wiped out? We cannot have people unable to get work because of trade union activity.

Justin Madders: I absolutely agree. We have had a number of debates on blacklisting, particularly in construction, but it applies in other areas. Whistleblowers often find that, once they have blown the whistle, they are unable to gain employment. It is a disgraceful activity that needs outlawing.

Alison McGovern (Wirral South) (Lab): My hon. Friend was just coming on to health and safety. Our area has a lot of heavy industry manufacturing. Does he agree that all the evidence demonstrates that where there is an active trade union branch, there is a much better safety culture than where trade unions are not welcome or, in some cases, prevented from organising?

Justin Madders: Yes. We have a lot of potentially dangerous industries in our area. The ones I tend to deal with have been around for a long time. They all have long-standing recognition agreements with trade unions, and excellent safety records as a result. It is a learning process, not an adversarial process, particularly in health and safety.

Some companies ought to take a leaf out of those employers’ books and learn how to treat and to deal with employee representatives in a much more reasonable and engaging way. A number of employers behave despically, adding to employees’ fears about victimisation, which leaves many individuals not wanting their employers to know that they belong to a trade union. How sad is that? How damning is it that some companies are so vindictive to their staff that their employees will not tell them that they belong to a trade union?

Only last week I met a constituent who told me what it was like in his workplace, where unions are not welcome, where arbitrary decisions are made about
who is retained and who is let go, and where all the workers are too worried to put their head above the parapet. I hope to discuss my concerns with the company in due course, but does it really need a Member of Parliament to remind an employer of how to treat its staff? If a trade union official was allowed access to the site, they would be able to do that, and in the end everybody would benefit—the workers and the company. At the moment they are locked out, which is simply not good enough. It is shocking that these kinds of things still take place in the 21st century.

What is the point of someone having the right to join a trade union if they cannot exercise that right because an employer refuses to engage? What is the point of their being a trade union member if they cannot be represented? I have lost count of the number of times companies have lied to employees about their right to be accompanied by trade union reps at disciplinary or grievance hearings by saying that, because the company does not recognise a particular trade union, those unions do not have the right to attend the hearings. The Government should clamp down on that.

We have a culture of weak employment rights, greedy corporations and a Government that obstruct trade unions. We need to get away from that and towards a period of renewal and rebuilding of one of the pillars of a decent society: job security. Without job security, people have no security. How can they plan for their future, for a home or for their family if the labour market is so cut-throat, so insecure and so parasitic that they are always just one step away from disaster? The stabilising force of trade unions is a vital component of a decent society.

“Rights” is not a dirty word. Rights are not only about individual dignity and respect in the workplace; they give people a stake in society, when they know that if they do a good job and their employer runs the business well, they will be rewarded. We need an economy where everyone has a stake in its prosperity, but to do that we must have a system that values the security and sustainability of a job itself as much as the principle of job creation. Good employers want to work with unions, and in an ideal world all employers would be able to do so without the need for the legislation that we have talked about.

Mr George Howarth (Knowsley) (Lab): My hon. Friend mentions insecure employment. Does he agree that while those on short-term or rolling contracts are among the least organised of the workforce in the United Kingdom, they actually need to be members of a trade union probably more than any other group of workers?

Justin Madders: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. We have seen an explosion of insecure employment in this country in recent years. We wonder why people are so fed up with the way this country is run. People have no security and do not know what they are doing from one day to the next. Let us not forget that until someone has two years of continuous employment somewhere, they have no employment rights whatsoever. What kind of country is that? We do not really want to live in a place where people have no protection until they have been somewhere for two years. Their whole life could change in that period. We absolutely need more support at an earlier stage for people who live in these precarious times.

This is not only about improving workplace rights, but about sending a message to employers that we need to move to a much more stable system, and we need the Government to bring forward legislation to encourage that. A good example is New Zealand’s Employment Relations Amendment Act, which has already had a positive impact on the workforce, restoring protections and strengthening the rights of workers without causing disruption to business. Just as importantly, it has changed people’s attitudes towards their right to represent themselves. I think the people of this country deserve the same. It is a shame that there are absolutely zero Members on the Tory Back Benches. That tells us absolutely everything that we need to know about the priority that the Conservative party places on this issue. In these circumstances, the idea that it could rebrand itself as the party of the worker is a joke.

In conclusion, it is only through improved access to workplaces that unions will be able to inform individuals of their rights and, critically, ensure that those rights are enforced—people’s rights are only as good as their ability to enforce them. Only then will we see real changes and improvements to people’s working lives. It is my belief that it is the duty of the Government to be an enabler in that process, not an accomplice to those who would deny people those basic rights.

Justin Madders: [In response to the remarks of the hon. Member for High Peak] This is not only about improving workplace rights, but about sending a message to employers that we need to move to a much more stable system, and we need the Government to bring forward legislation to encourage that. A good example is New Zealand’s Employment Relations Amendment Act, which has already had a positive impact on the workforce, restoring protections and strengthening the rights of workers without causing disruption to business. Just as importantly, it has changed people’s attitudes towards their right to represent themselves. I think the people of this country deserve the same. It is a shame that there are absolutely zero Members on the Tory Back Benches. That tells us absolutely everything that we need to know about the priority that the Conservative party places on this issue. In these circumstances, the idea that it could rebrand itself as the party of the worker is a joke.

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level; at local level, the presence of a trade union rep can give people confidence in the management in the company—confidence that things are being done right.

My hon. Friend the Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders) mentioned health and safety. I am honoured to have the laboratory for the Health and Safety Executive in my constituency. It is really useful to be able to talk to people there about how best to implement health and safety at work, particularly given the decline in the resources that the Government give to the Health and Safety Executive. We have seen inspections decline—they are now done on a risk-assessed basis—but where a workplace has trade union representatives who are trained in health and safety, those health and safety reps do risk assessments and take soundings from their work colleagues, who often feel more able to raise problems with their trade union representatives than with their management, particularly if they are concerned about their safety. That is even more the case where there are people in the workplace with a disability or some other form of impairment. It is so important that they feel that they have that support.

We have some basic rights at work, but in the UK they are particularly basic, and we often see that even those are not provided. We have a system of employment tribunals whereby individuals have to put their head above the parapet, as has been mentioned; they have to show that they are able to make a complaint in order to access an employment tribunal. That does not help the rest of the workforce, who are probably suffering in exactly the same conditions, particularly where the issue has to do with the minimum wage, holiday pay, sick pay, parental leave or flexible working. Those are basic rights at work that we expect to be in place, but too often they are not, and individual employees have to put themselves forward in order to be able to access a particular right. Many feel that it is not worth it; many feel that it is better to move on to a different place of work. That does not help the other people there.

To access the protection from unfair dismissal, a person now has to have been in a workplace for two years. We have an increasingly mobile workforce, so a growing number of people are not able to access the right to claim unfair dismissal, and do not feel that they can access any of the other rights that enable them to take a case to their employer or to a tribunal, especially where they cannot get the support of a trade union representative in that. That is why, as I have said, it is so important that trade union representatives are able to come in and support individual members in a workplace. Even where the union is not the recognised trade union, the trade union reps need to be able to support their members, who are paying for the privilege of membership. If they are paying for that service, it is not right that their employer should be able to deny it to them.

**Alison McGovern:** My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech. Does she agree, at this moment, when we are trying to deal with cultures of bullying or sexual harassment, that it is very important that when people take complaints forward, they have somebody with them to give them confidence and comfort in what can be a stressful and sometimes distressing situation?

**Ruth George:** Absolutely. My hon. Friend makes an excellent point. People often spend the majority of their waking lives at work, and the relationships in the workplace are some of the most important to them. If they are subject to bullying or harassment, that affects their whole life and their confidence in taking the issue forward, so having a trade union representative, or a trade union office that they know they can phone for expert support and advice—having someone on their side—is so important, particularly when they are taking forward a case against a manager or another colleague with whom they work closely. That creates very difficult situations for individuals.

It is not just individuals who benefit from trade union membership. The state also benefits from higher productivity and from better pay and conditions, which reduce the reliance on in-work benefits that comes from low pay and low hours at work. Universal credit is being rolled out, and the only thing that employers have been told by the Department for Work and Pensions is that they no longer have to give people set hours of work. With tax credits, people used to need to have a contract to work 16, 24 or 30 hours a week, for access at different points. Employers knew that and were prepared to give those contracts to ensure that people could afford to live on the contract of work. Under universal credit, yes, people can access mini jobs, with fewer hours of work, but that will encourage employers to provide more flexibility within contracts; I am afraid that the Department for Work and Pensions is actively encouraging them in that. They may not be zero-hours contracts—those are bad enough—but they are short-hour contracts, sometimes for as little as four or eight hours a week. People simply cannot afford to live on them, but employers are happy to give those sorts of contracts and to ask people to flex up when they are busy. It gives employers maximum flexibility, but it does not mean that people who are in work can get by.

That is why we are seeing such a huge increase in in-work poverty. Up to 8 million workers—more than one quarter of the workforce—are now in poverty. That is a crying shame for any decent economy, any decent society. If someone goes out to work, they should be able to support themselves; if there are two of them, they should be able to support a family. There are rising house prices, housing costs and rents, but there have been reduced real wages for almost a decade, and people simply cannot afford to live on the wages that they get.

The issue is not just pay but pension provision. Employers with trade unions provide far better pension entitlements than employers who do not recognise a trade union. Again, the state benefits, because it does not then have to provide a top-up where pensioners are falling into poverty. Trade unions that I saw in the workplace helped to keep better pension schemes going for their members. We have seen innovative schemes, such as the Communication Workers Union and Royal Mail scheme, that will help far more workers continue to have a decent standard of living when they retire, and will save the state from having to step in when people fall into poverty because they have an inadequate pension scheme.

Trade unions can bring benefits across the whole range of rights at work, pay and conditions, and pensions. That is why it is inexcusable that no Conservative Back-Bench MPs have bothered to turn up to this debate to, for the very least, discuss the value of trade unions in a workplace and have a robust discussion about their merits and what they can bring to working people who particularly need that support.
We certainly need trade unions in the workplace, and I have some particular stories to share.

My hon. Friend the Member for Warrington South (Faisal Rashid) on securing it and on speaking so passionately in his introductory remarks. He raised issues that resonate very strongly with me and, indeed, with the wider trade union movement across this country.

It is good to start on a positive note: trade union membership in the United Kingdom has gone up in the past year by 103,000. Now 6.35 million people are members of a trade union in the United Kingdom.

Trade union membership is half of its peak in the late 1970s, when there were 12 million members of trade unions. Over that time, we have seen a 5% fall in the labour share of our economy—the share of our gross national wealth taken home by workers in wages has fallen. There is a strong correlation between the trade union organisation and collective bargaining power in our economy and the amount of wealth that workers are able to secure from the fruits of their labour.

We need to return that fundamental analysis to the heart of how we understand our economy and the relationship between working people and the owners of capital. It has been forgotten from the mainstream narrative in this country, which is about shirkers, people not working hard enough and how people need to be more flexible and sacrifice more, rather than about unity, organisation and agitation against exploitation and in favour of workers’ right to receive the fruits of their labour. The correlation is stark; it is a fact of economic history. The long-term trend in the past 40 years is a diminishing share of wealth for workers.

It would not be half as bad if that share, which workers once took home in their pay packets, was invested by companies and private capital to improve the efficiency of our economy. However, it has not been invested at all. Investment as a share of GDP has flattened throughout that period. I wonder where that share of capital has gone. The workers are producing wealth and productivity continues to go up, but the share taken home in wages is declining.

That is the stark reality that we face. That is why, I would argue, having a Labour Government is so critical to restoring the collective bargaining powers in our economy, which are so essential to recapturing the share of the wealth that working people rightly deserve and produce in this country.

Workers put in great innovation, productivity and effort every day in many workplaces across the United Kingdom. However, we have seen the hollowing out of their collective capacity to fight for their share of the wealth they produce.

We have seen an increase in trade union membership. Of the total UK workforce, about 23% of workers are in trade unions. However, there are regional disparities in the way trade union organisation works across the United Kingdom. Trade union membership in London and the south-east is 16% to 17% of workers, yet in Scotland, the north-west, north-east and Wales it is between 28% and 30%. There is significant regional variation. There are a number of reasons for that.

First, in areas with traditional manufacturing and labour-intensive employment, where there are large industrial employers, there seems to be more cultural recognition of trade union membership—it is an accepted fact of life. Secondly, in some regions the public sector forms a much more important share of the economy. In public sector workplaces, 52% of the workforce are trade union members, whereas in the private sector, membership is at a mere 13%. That is a huge contrast, which has evolved and become more stark in the past 40 years.

There is a significant age disparity in trade union membership, which reflects the increased casualisation of work. My hon. Friend the Member for Warrington South mentioned McDonald’s employees being exploited. Many in the retail and food sectors see that happen on a daily basis. Just 4% of 16 to 24-year-olds are members of trade unions, and 77% of trade union members are over 35. The age disparity is significant and we need to tackle it.

We need to introduce information about trade unions into our education system. When I first entered work, I was exploited by employers. I undertook unpaid trial shifts. I worked minimum-wage jobs. I was denied tips. I started in a pizzeria and then worked in a supermarket. When I started working in fruit and veg at Morrisons supermarket, we had a presentation from the USDAW official. At that time, I did not really understand what a trade union was or why it would be significant to me.

Why should I give up the precious little money I was paid to a trade union when I could take it home and spend it on going out and having a good time with my pals? Believe it or not, I did have a good time. Education is required on why trade union representation is important, particularly for young people for whom exploitation has never been more critical.

Ruth George: I am pleased to hear that my hon. Friend had a positive experience of the USDAW official. Unfortunately, I have met too many people, young and old, who started their first job in fruit and veg in a supermarket and injured their back, often for life, because of incorrect lifting practices, and who did not have trade union representation in the workplace to support them and ensure they were lifting correctly. That happens to too many young people. I hope it did not happen to my hon. Friend.
Mr Sweeney: Believe it or not, that did not happen. I managed to survive my experience in fruit and veg largely unscathed. My hon. Friend makes an important point. People never know when they will need a trade union until they do. It is critical that people join, because it is like an insurance policy. We need to educate people in that necessity.

My first adult job was in a shipyard. It was a traditional engineering and manufacturing company—a large-scale employer—where there was significant trade union density. At that point, I joined the Unite and GMB trade unions, because they were the shipyard trade unions. They ably represent the workforce on the Clyde and are often mentioned in this place. I ran into trouble from time to time in the shipyard and my trade union was critical in helping me get through those difficult periods. If I had a dispute with my bosses or another issue, the officials were very helpful. I did not know when I would need them—when a bit of bad luck could strike. It is critical that people understand why trade union membership is so important.

Danielle Rowley: My hon. Friend is giving a detailed analysis and a great speech. Does he agree that there is less trade union membership in the third sector? It is often seen to be the nice sector, but it employs a lot of travelled people and women, and we need to encourage more trade union membership within it.

Mr Sweeney: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend. She makes a good point about the gender disparity. It is interesting to note that female membership of trade unions has increased in the past year, but male membership has decreased. That does not read across the different sectors that she mentioned. It is important to recognise that issue, particularly when we look at casualisation in the workforce, which is a key driver of why workers are taking home less in their pay packets than they ought to.

Traditional collective bargaining in large-scale organisations and traditional large industrial workplaces are fragmenting, and the way people work is continually atomising. We need to adapt our trade union regulation and organisation to reflect the changing nature of our economy. The charity sector has not been penetrated by the trade union movement to the same extent. We need to tackle that. Great thought must be given to how to increase recruitment to trade unions in those non-traditional workplaces.

I will offer another view as to why trade union membership is so critical. In the past few months, I have been dealing with a major industrial dispute in my constituency. The Caley railway works, which has been around for 160 years, faces closure. From 1948 to 1995 it was part of British Rail, but it was privatised and sold off. It has been through myriad different owners, culminating in an overseas company purchasing it in an asset-stripping exercise. There are 200 people on that site, which faces closure. Thankfully, they have high trade union density—90%, which is fantastic—because the railway works was a traditional workplace. The trade union was able to swing into action immediately when the closure was announced.

In stark contrast, when the immediate closure of Jamie’s Italian was announced, the workforce were completely blindsided and had no capacity to organise and effectively agitate against that exploitation. People were told to go home with no recourse, redundancy payment or share in the liquidation of the company. With the potential closure of the Caley railway works, the trade union was able to organise to bid up the terms and conditions of severance for the workforce. The liabilities of the workforce were originally assessed as being about £700,000 to close the site. The trade union has now managed to negotiate almost £4 million from the employer to wind up the site. That is an amazing achievement, and the company has even offered to try to sell it or pay the Government to take the site off its hands, because the owners just want rid of it. That is just one example of how effective negotiation by trade unions can massively improve the hand of workers who face really difficult disputes with their employers.

I pay tribute to the tenacity of the Caley railway works workforce, who are facing the most testing conditions and were told just before Christmas—as is often the case—that they would lose their livelihoods. People have been working there for generations. Families have grown up and lived around the railway works their whole lives, to the point that in some cases people felt there was no other way out but to take their lives. The stress that the workforce have had to deal with has been absolutely appalling. I pay tribute to their tenacious work, particularly by Pat McIlvogue of Unite the union, in organising the workforce and keeping their spirits high at a really tough time. I hope the Government in Edinburgh will step in and take action to save those jobs and the workforce, because they deserve it. They deserve to have that commitment shown to them by the state.

The Government and trade unions can work in co-operation to ensure that we salvage the collective knowledge and skills of our workforce and redeploy them in the future, rather than see the industrial vandalism that has so often happened across this country, where we have seen industrial capability destroyed. With the lack of a trade union to organise, agitate and struggle against it, there has not been the fight that could have been mounted. I pay tribute to everyone in the trade union movement who has fought so hard for workers’ rights to capture a better share of workers’ efforts—in the form of labour—in wages, and to secure their rights and those of future generations who will follow in their footsteps, so that we have a prosperous society that gets a fair day’s pay for a fair day’s work.

5.22 pm

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Ms McDonagh. I congratulate the hon. Member for Warrington South (Faisal Rashid) on securing this debate and on bringing forward his ten-minute rule Bill, which I support—he has my guarantee.

It is traditional in these trade union debates to make our declarations. I declare my 20 years of trade union activity before I was elected to this place, my membership of Glasgow City Unison, and my position as chair of the Public and Commercial Services Union parliamentary group. I will in the next few days declare a settlement agreement with my former employer as a result of an equal pay claim.

I make those declarations not just to show my trade union credentials; it is obviously important to mention the trade union role in the education and personal
development of workers. I have no shame in saying—I am sure I am not the only Member of Parliament present who would say this—that I would not be here without the skills, knowledge and experience I gained as a trade union representative and activist.

The hon. Member for Warrington South described the historical and present contexts. On the current context, it is very interesting that the governing party is having a leadership election—a so-called grand national, although I think the grand national is for thoroughbreds, not necessarily for people putting themselves forward for leader of the Conservative party. Many who are seeking to be the next Prime Minister have the inclination to deregulate markets—an inclination not too dissimilar to that of Donald Trump. It seems that some will argue that is the way to leave provisions and more likely to work fewer hours of unpaid overtime. Those are important gains. Members are also more likely to find themselves in a pay and grading scheme that complies with the Equal Pay Act 1970, and trade unions have played a vital role in ensuring that employers comply with that very important piece of legislation. As the chief economist of the Bank of England has said, the weakening of trade union power in the United Kingdom has hit workers’ pay over the past few decades.

Trade unionism should be viewed as an opportunity to improve workplace relations, as trade union representatives and officials bring a vital perspective to a workplace, and do more than play a role in collective bargaining; for example, they ensure effective communication between employers and workers. Indeed, trade unions provide workers who go on to become trade union representatives with the opportunity for personal development through lifelong learning. They ensure a common footing on communication between employees and employers.

I want to highlight the great work being done by organisations such as Better Than Zero, which is highlighting some awful employment practices, particularly on zero-hour contracts and the status of workers—the bogus self-employment that is increasing in the economy. Since I support the ten-minute rule Bill introduced by the hon. Member for Warrington South, I hope that he will support mine. The Workers (Definition and Rights) Bill, because it is important that we deal with zero-hours contracts. Under my Bill, such contracts would be allowed in only one circumstance: where there is a collective agreement with an organised trade union. That would nail once and for all the view espoused by some people that workers like zero-hours contracts. Having trade unions in workplaces where there are zero-hours contracts would put that to the test. My Bill would simplify the status of workers, because there is far too much bogus self-employment—people are finding out that they are self-employed when they thought that they were employees. It would also provide another opportunity to expose the anti-trade union Act that was passed in the last Parliament and has significantly reduced the mobilisation and organising power of trade unions. The Act has in particular impacted on facility time, which is integral to a trade union’s ability to prepare for collective bargaining. That law pits the Government and employers against trade unions and is needlessly divisive. Publishing details of facility time and its so-called cost to the public purse is frankly outrageous. The fact is that trade union reps save both time and money by improving workplace relations and enforcing best practice.

I support the hon. Gentleman’s Bill, and I hope he supports mine. It is a pleasure once again to support the trade union movement—the best partner with our society.

5.31 pm

Laura Pidcock (North West Durham) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Warrington South (Faisal Rashid) on securing this debate, on introducing his ten-minute rule Bill, and on bringing
trade union issues to the House of Commons. With some exceptions, it is only Labour Members who press these issues continuously and bring the worker’s voice into this space.

I welcome the opportunity to speak on an important issue for workers everywhere. I declare my interest as a member of Unite the union. We know from information provided by a number of unions, including the Bakers, Food and Allied Workers Union, GMB, Unite and Unison, that union officials are routinely denied access to workplaces by many employers. There are examples of trade union officials being locked out of workplaces, prevented from speaking to workers or forced to meet members in car parks—some horrifying stories have been outlined by comrades in this room today.

What is this debate really about? In my mind, it is simply about trade unions and workers exercising their fundamental right to meet, discuss and organise on issues that workers face. That right is being systematically denied in this country; for most workers, it does not exist and has not existed for some time because of the serious restrictions placed on unions, because of employers’ anti-union practices and because of the fear that is whipped up in workplaces and that often prevents workers from having the confidence to exercise their rights.

Here are just a few examples, from across the UK, of what happens when workers take part in union activity, want to meet their trade unions or talk to fellow workers. As has been mentioned, a young worker from Watford was enthused by winning positive change in his workplace through the union, but was then banned from going into any McDonald’s in the area. He was told that he was not allowed to talk to other workers. Managers are being trained to notice the signs and language of a union and report them to senior management. Managers are telling workers that they can be sacked for joining a trade union. Portuguese workers in McDonald’s in Cambridge were told that they could be sent to jail for taking strike action.

Tim Martin, chair and founder of Wetherspoon, has refused even to speak to the general secretary of the Bakers, Food and Allied Workers Union, which has many members in Wetherspoon. What kind of disregard is that? The general secretary of PCS had to address his civil servant members in a blizzard in a car park in January. What kind of respect did that show to all his union and report them to senior management. Managers are telling workers that they can be sacked for joining a trade union. Portuguese workers in McDonald’s in Cambridge were told that they could be sent to jail for taking strike action.

The Minister might want to take note of those very simple asks. Does he agree that workers who are not trade union members should have a fundamental right of access to information that allows them to consider membership?

The New Zealand legislation also allows union representatives to bargain with the employer for a collective agreement; deal with health and safety issues for members; check that the employer is complying with the collective agreement and with employment law; help individuals to implement employment agreements; and ask the employer to comply with any relevant requirements if non-compliance has been detected. So many of those things are crucial to helping workers to access their basic rights, yet there is no comparable right of access in this country. It is true that the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy has a code of practice that gives unions access to the workplace during recognition ballots, but Labour must, and will, build on that to provide a general right of access to the workplace for trade union officials for the lawful purposes of the union.

Under Labour’s plans, trade unions will, on giving reasonable notice to the employer, have a right of access to a workplace for the purposes of organising, meeting and representing workers on any matter relating to their employment. The employer will be under a duty to provide an opportunity for meetings to be held on the premises, in conditions that are reasonable and appropriate and that respect the confidentiality of the workers and the union.

I stress two points. First, “access” must mean both physical access and access by email, where email is provided or controlled by the employer. In both cases, access should be free from employer surveillance, and the fear of intimidation should not prevent workers from speaking to a union. Secondly, we have to deal with employers who refuse to provide access despite the law; access delayed is access denied, as the saying goes. We may need to look again to New Zealand, where denial of access can lead to financial penalties on the employer. We will look at all ways of ensuring that the
denial of trade union access rights and of other trade union rights is dealt with effectively and appropriately by enforcement.

Any effective right of access introduced by a Labour Government along those lines will go a long way towards helping to restore the balance of power in the workplace. It will enable trade unions to speak to workers about the benefits of trade union recognition and expand the coverage of collective bargaining, and it will enable trade unions to speak for workers, ensure that they are effectively represented and address the abuses that we know are taking place. Colleagues have talked about workers being scared to go to the toilet, or having to go to the toilet in really degrading circumstances, and about heavily pregnant women not being given a seat. It is clearly men, who have never been heavily pregnant, who have designed those rules. The Government just refuse to address those abuses through serious legislation.

They think, “Just leave it to the free market. Leave it to the employers to do whatever they want to do.”

I am mindful that rights of access can only be the very beginning of a programme to restore trade union presence in the workplace; it is only the start of giving workers a voice, and of ensuring that high standards and a good quality of work are a reality for everyone.

We need to look again at trade union recognition legislation to remove obstacles that make it difficult for trade unions to secure recognition for collective bargaining. We also need to look again at legislation for dealing with trade union facilities, so that trade union representatives in the workplace have the time, space, resources and powers to carry out their duties. We also need to look at legislation dealing with the right of workers to be accompanied by a trade union representative, to ensure that all workers have the right to full trade union representation at work.

We are under no illusions; trade union access to the workplace is just one of several crucial steps in strengthening workers’ rights. It is, however, an essential step in our plan to roll out sectoral collective bargaining. The reintroduction of that bargaining, so that sector by sector, workers can negotiate on and determine pay, terms and conditions, hinges on workplaces being opened up. This is critical.

I finish with a political point, because this is a political Chamber, is it not? So often we look at the technical details of all these issues, but what do they actually mean for workers? Throughout our history, has there not been constant tension between workers and the state, with the state often removing the rights that workers have fought for, or ignoring and resisting the rights that workers demand? Trade unions’ access to the workplace goes to the very heart of how our society is set up, the cultural norms established, and who they benefit. Often, those cultural norms are not established by working-class people.

In the current climate, workers are scared to talk about the issues that affect them. Our culture makes them petrified of losing their job; it says that that should be their No. 1 fear, and it should dictate how they work and what they say in the workplace. The system, and the norms that we live by support this climate of fear, so that the worker defers to the employer all the time, worried that they could be replaced at any time.

As was mentioned, the system is rigged against workers, to enable those who own the capital or the business to extract as much value as possible from the worker for the smallest reward—and, it seems, with the least comfort for workers.

The consequence of all this is that power is concentrated in very few hands, which is really unhealthy. It means that entire workforces are stressed, tired, underpaid, undervalued and—let us be honest—deeply dissatisfied with life, with little to look forward to.

In the Labour and trade union movement, we have a totally different way of viewing the world of work. We believe that it is workers who create the wealth, and that they deserve the right to negotiate freely their rate of pay; and that it is a fundamental right of workers to assemble, associate with one another, organise and bargain with the employer with one voice. It is therefore common sense that trade unions should have access to the workplace; it is their space, and it is their right to meet the people they represent, or wish to represent. That should not be a difficult concept to grasp. If policies were won on the strength of argument alone, the Labour side would clearly have won this argument, and not just because nobody from the Government side has spoken. Our argument is not that weak; it is a powerful and commonsense one, even though Government Members did not turn up today. To my mind, those on the other side of this argument do grasp the simplicity of enacting those rights, but I think they are deeply scared of and worried about its transformative potential for working-class people.

5.44 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Andrew Stephenson): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms McDonagh.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Warrington South (Faisal Rashid) on securing today’s important debate, and commend the impassioned speeches by the hon. Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders), for High Peak (Ruth George), for Glasgow North East (Mr Sweeney), for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens), and for North West Durham (Laura Pidcock).

I am very pleased to engage in this debate. Before I address the individual points made by hon. Members, I want to put it on record that the Government recognise the important role that trade unions play across the United Kingdom, and I personally recognise the important role that they play. In my role as a constituency MP, I have worked closely with trade union representatives at Rolls-Royce, which has a site at Barnoldswick in my constituency, and since my appointment as Business and Industry Minister, I have met trade union representatives at BAE Systems here in Parliament and trade union representatives at British Steel on a visit to Scunthorpe.

John Howell (Henley) (Con): I am glad that the Minister mentioned all of those organisations, but there is another organisation that he should mention, which is the Council of Europe, of which we are a member. The Council of Europe has always taken a very strong line on this issue. For example, it runs facilitation courses to help people to understand the role of trade unions and how they can participate in them. That is something that we should be proud of.
Andrew Stephenson: I thank my hon. Friend for his point. He is not just a powerful advocate in the Council of Europe, but a powerful advocate in this place for the role it plays in helping to make positive change, not only in this country but across Europe.

Trade unions have played a long and positive role in our society; they have long represented their members and lobbied for wider changes in society. They have campaigned on equality issues for women and other groups, helped to tackle child poverty and fought against modern day slavery. They have shown how we can bring about change that benefits everybody in society.

Over the decades, unions have improved the working lives of their members, and this Government hope to see that continue. Throughout the country, trade union health and safety representatives have made our workplaces safer, which not only benefits workers but contributes to our economy, by reducing accidents.

Unions have also invested in people, working to develop the skills of their members. Unionlearn is an excellent example of that. It has helped to engage with more than 50 trade unions in more than 700 workplaces. Unionlearn has helped those with low literacy and numeracy and also helped to recruit and support thousands of apprentices. That is why the Government continue to support initiatives such as Unionlearn with over £8 million over the previous and coming years.

Justin Madders: In the spending review, which may or may not happen some time this year, will the Minister advocate for Unionlearn’s funding at least to continue at that level or perhaps to increase?

Andrew Stephenson: I can assure the hon. Gentleman that, as a fellow north-west MP, I am a passionate advocate of the positive role that unions can play. I have stepped into this debate today because the Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, my hon. friend the Member for Rochester and Strood (Kelly Tolhurst), who is the Minister with responsibility for small business, consumers and corporate responsibility, has to take an urgent question in the main Chamber. This is her policy remit, but I will certainly speak to her to see what we can do to ensure that we lobby for things such as Unionlearn in the spending review. I am passionate about trade unions. In 2015, I helped to re-establish the Conservative workers and trade union movement in my own party, so Members have a friend of the trade union movement stood before them today.

Let me turn to the points made in the debate. I think it would be helpful if I set out the legislative position. Workers in the UK have a right to join a trade union. That right is protected under our trade union law. It is automatically unfair for an employer to dismiss an employee on the grounds of trade union membership or for being active in a trade union, and employers cannot subject their workers to detriment in attempting to deter union membership or participation in trade union activities.

All union members have the right to participate in union activities, which includes members who are union officials. They have the right, for example, to organise union meetings and consult their members. Furthermore, the right to be active in the affairs of a trade union is enhanced where the union is an independent union that is recognised by the employer for collective bargaining purposes. Officials of such unions may seek time off work with pay to discharge certain union duties. Members who are union learning representatives may also seek paid time off in order to carry out their functions. Individual workers can enforce these rights at an employment tribunal.

Faisal Rashid: I want to emphasise that the debate is about what happens before people become members of a union. The Minister is explaining exactly what members’ rights are, but we are not talking about those rights; we are talking about what happens before employees become union members.

Andrew Stephenson: I appreciate that point, and I hope I will get to address it slightly later in my remarks. I was trying to emphasise that those rights, as they exist, amount to the right for a union, through its individual members and officials, to recruit and organise in a workplace.

It is important that I address the argument about the UK’s general commitment to human rights. In particular, I wish to refute the argument that the right, under article 11 of the European convention on human rights, for workers to join a trade union and to organise is effectively being denied. That could not be further from the truth. The UK has a long-standing commitment to uphold human rights. The Government are satisfied that our trade union legislation complies with our international obligations, including article 11 of the European convention.

As I have set out previously, workers are free to join a trade union and to participate in trade union activities. That is protected by law. Unions are also free to organise and seek collective bargaining arrangements with employers. Where an employer refuses to recognise a trade union voluntarily, our legislation provides for a statutory recognition procedure. That allows independent unions to apply to the Central Arbitration Committee to be formally recognised for collective bargaining purposes. Unions that can demonstrate majority support for recognition in the workplace will secure statutory recognition from the committee.

Chris Stephens: The Minister defines the legal position. Does he believe, therefore, that the Government could do more to enforce that legislation, to ensure that the many alarming examples that the hon. Member for Warrington South (Faisal Rashid) gave us are not repeated anywhere in the United Kingdom?

Andrew Stephenson: I do not wish to comment on any of the individual cases that have been raised by Members today, but it is always important to keep these things under review, to look at the evidence and to see where legislation can be changed if there is a need for that, to reflect what is happening in the labour markets. Returning to the Central Arbitration Committee, the UK courts have found that the statutory recognition procedure complies with article 11. Furthermore, the European Court of Human Rights has accepted the Government’s view that the UK’s trade union legislation strikes the right balance between the rights of trade unions and their members, and the legitimate interests of others. The UK’s system is based on the democratic wishes of workers in the workplace. If workers in the UK want to organise and be represented by a trade union, they have the means to do so.
Ruth George: I think the Minister will find that in practice individual workers do not have the ability to organise themselves and to join trade unions, as all the evidence presented by Opposition Members has shown. Employers frequently victimise trade union members and do not allow trade unions into the workplace to support their members, even when they are needed.

Andrew Stephenson: I take the hon. Lady’s point. As a constituency MP, I have come across companies whose practices I would not approve of, and I have taken the matter up with managers and been able to secure better access for trade union officials. The hon. Lady will know that workers have the right to bring a union representative to a disciplinary or grievance hearing. Unions have the right to accompany workers in such cases, even if the union is not recognised. It is fundamental that we allow unions access and that we remind workers all the time that they have that right.

Several hon. Members rose—

Andrew Stephenson: I want to make progress because there were many speakers and there are lots of points to cover.

Ruth George: On that point, the member might have the right to be accompanied but the trade union representative does not have the right to speak in the meeting, so their presence is pointless. Does the Minister not agree that that makes the regulation fairly useless?

Andrew Stephenson: No, I would never describe trade union representatives as pointless. It is important that they are able to attend and support workers in grievance or disciplinary meetings. They do not have to be able to speak to support someone.

On giving practical effect to article 11 rights, let me turn to a matter that a number of hon. Members have raised: facility time for union representatives to carry out union activities. I agree that without facility time union representatives cannot carry out their trade union duties in relation to collective bargaining and related matters, and our trade union legislation provides for that. Where an independent union has been recognised by an employer for collective bargaining purposes, the employer is required to provide facility time to the union’s representatives and its members. Union representatives are entitled to paid time off to carry out their union duties as well as paid time off for training. That allows them to negotiate with the employer and carry out their functions in relation to matters covered by the collective bargaining agreement.

Several hon. Members rose—

Andrew Stephenson: I have to make some progress.

Union members are also entitled to unpaid time off during working hours to participate in union activities, for example to attend union meetings or vote in internal union elections.

In relation to access to facilities, the ACAS code of practice on time off for trade union duties and activities states that employers should, where practical, make available to union representatives the facilities necessary for them to perform their duties efficiently and to communicate with their members. The provisions of the code are admissible in evidence in proceedings before an employment tribunal relating to time off for trade union duties and activities. Provisions of the code that appear to the tribunal to be relevant should be taken into account. The Government therefore believe that the current arrangements in relation to facility time are sufficient. The arrangements have been in place for a long time, and are well understood by both employers and trade unions.

Chris Stephens: I thank the Minister for his generosity. Why, therefore, is it necessary for the Government to publish the so-called cost to the public purse of facility time for civil service trade unions? It seems to me that there is no cost and that the benefits of providing facility time outweigh the so-called cost.

Andrew Stephenson: I will raise that matter with the Minister for Small Business, Consumers and Corporate Responsibility, and I am sure she will be more than happy to write to the hon. Gentleman with an answer.

In his speech on 15 May introducing his Bill, and again today, the hon. Member for Warrington South referred to strengthening collective bargaining in the workplace. In the UK, collective bargaining remains an important method whereby pay and other terms and conditions are set. The UK takes a voluntary approach to collective issues. Collective bargaining is largely a matter for individual employers, their employees and their trade unions. Most collective bargaining in this country takes place because employers have voluntarily agreed to recognise a trade union and bargain with it. The Government do not believe that they should be in the business of forcing employers or their workers to enter into collective bargaining arrangements if they do not wish to do so. Instead, we prefer a voluntary and democratic approach. However, where an employer refuses to recognise a trade union voluntarily, our legislation provides for a statutory recognition procedure.

In 2018-19, the Central Arbitration Committee received 56 trade union recognition applications. Of those, six were able to reach agreement without the need for a ballot, including that reached between the employer Babcock Mission Critical Services Onshore and Prospect. A total of 25 applications were withdrawn and, encouragingly, 13 of these were because the employers and unions were able to reach agreement voluntarily. The key point I wish to reiterate is that if a majority of workers in a workplace want to organise and be represented by a trade union, they have the right to secure trade union recognition for collective bargaining purposes.

The Government recognise the important role that trade unions play in the UK economy and society and, personally, I hope that that continues for many years to come. Individual workers have the right to join a union and take part in union activities. Unions, through their individual members and officials, effectively have the right to recruit and organise in the workplace. Unions are also free to seek collective bargaining agreements with employers. If necessary, they can obtain statutory trade union recognition as long as they can demonstrate majority support for union recognition in the workplace. Our legislation therefore does not need amending. It is well established, and has been backed by successive
Governments. If workers and unions want collective bargaining in workplaces across the UK, they are free to organise to achieve that.

Siobhain McDonagh (in the Chair): I apologise that we have until only 6 o’clock.

5.59 pm

Faisal Rashid: I thank all my hon. Friends who have taken part in the debate. Every one of them has made excellent and eloquent points. In the few seconds I have left, I wish to respond to the Minister. I am very disappointed, because 80% to 90% of his response was about what union members can do rather than about trade unions’ access to the workplace. I totally appreciate that he is substituting on his colleague’s behalf; however, I reiterate that he should go back and do some real thinking about what we on this side of the House are, with some common sense, proposing.

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 10(6)).
highlight three factors that threaten the ability of our police forces to maintain order at football matches. First, as I said in opening, police forces are under the biggest strain they have faced in modern times. They have vastly reduced budgets and are dealing with a rising tide of violence and organised crime within our communities—something that, sadly, I know too well in my constituency. The number of officers available to cover matches is lower than it was, which unfortunately means that police officers must be taken away from neighbourhoods to support match day policing.

Secondly, disorder at football matches is rising. The figures presented to me by the UK football policing unit are stark: disorder has risen, with nearly 38% of professional matches reporting some form of violence or disorder incident during the 2017-18 season, compared with 25% of matches during the 2013-14 season. I have seen police footage of recent disorder at football matches, some of which is truly shocking. Many of those incidents took place away from the ground, where police are often less well positioned to respond. The consistent and sharp rise in hate crime at football matches is particularly concerning: police received reports of hate crime at 127 fixtures in 2017-18, and the campaign group Kick It Out received over 500 reports during the same season. As a society, we still have a long way to go in stamping racism, homophobia and sexism out of our beautiful game. Although education is at the heart of that work, police officers need to be able and ready to clamp down hard on the tiny minority of people who pollute football.

The third problem facing the police is that despite the rise in disorder over recent years, they are able to recover only a small proportion of the money they spend on policing. Mark Roberts, the football policing lead for the National Police Chiefs’ Council, has put the cost of policing professional football matches in England and Wales at over £48 million a year, of which police are able to claim back only around £5.5 million from clubs. Why are the police repaid only a fraction of their costs? The question of who pays for football policing is complicated, and has been in dispute for many years. The argument chiefly centres on the cost of policing outside stadiums, whether on closed streets immediately surrounding them or routes to and from the match. Despite the huge wealth that many football clubs have, they consistently challenge the extent to which they should refund the police for their expenditure outside the ground itself.

Currently, the legal position on the extent to which police can charge clubs for match costs is based on an October 2017 Court of Appeal ruling that went in favour of Ipswich Town and against Suffolk police. The ruling in that case was that the police could recover only the costs of policing the stadium itself—not even the immediate surroundings, let alone the wider area. To any of us who attend matches, it is clear that police do a significant amount of extra work outside the stadium to ensure that fans can go to and from matches safely. In giving their judgment, the judges recognised that the situation seemed unfair, but argued that it was for the Government to fix it. That difficult legal situation is significantly worse than it was previously, when the roads around stadiums were often deemed to be under the control of the football club, and policing costs were therefore recoverable.

The three combined problems of severe police cuts, a rise in match day disorder and legal rulings that are unfavourable to the police mean that both the safety of fans and the sustainability of policing are under threat. It is hardly for me to talk in detail about just how much money is in football, but a few figures will illustrate the resources available, and therefore the ability of clubs to pay a higher percentage of policing costs. In 2017-18, the 20 Premier League clubs alone had combined revenues of over £4.8 billion—almost double the entire budget of the Metropolitan police. One particularly stark fact, which comes from analysis undertaken by the National Police Chiefs’ Council, is that the £211 million paid to football agents last year is more than the annual budgets of 27 of the 43 territorial police forces in England and Wales. We should be in no doubt that there is far more money available to top football clubs than to local police forces.

What might be done to create a better situation? I would not want to be too prescriptive in suggesting to the Minister how the situation could be resolved. However, I ask whether he agrees that action needs to be taken. I also ask whether he agrees that any such action needs to be proportionate in how it targets clubs. We need to be aware of those clubs that may suffer incidents of disorder but do not have the financial resources of the top leagues. Full cost recovery could be damaging for many local league clubs, which leads me to support a suggestion by the police that a levy on football TV rights might be the fairest way for police to receive additional funding. The Premier League’s total TV rights are now expected to exceed £3 billion a year. To illustrate, a 1% levy could recover enough money to cover a substantial portion of football policing costs and relieve clubs and the police of expensive and time-consuming arguments about the extent of payments.

In public policy today, there is often cross-party support for policies that ensure the costs of dealing with a problem for society are borne by the organisation responsible for the activity causing the issue. We see that with recycling levies for packaging firms and carbon taxes for power companies. Does the Minister agree that the taxes paid by football clubs or footballers cannot be used as an argument against clubs contributing properly to policing costs? Taxes pay for the benefits we all share as a society; football clubs should bear a more representative fraction of the burden for the costs incurred in keeping fans safe.

**Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op):** I agree entirely with my hon. Friend. She is making a strongly argued case. The problem is that football clubs are their own worst enemies. They say, “No spectators on the pitch,” but they blatantly ignore that when spectators do come on the pitch, as they do when fans bring pyrotechnics or provocative signs into the ground. Clubs owe a responsibility to the vast majority of fans to stamp that out. Does my hon. Friend agree that they could do much more on that?

**Gill Furniss:** I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention, which makes exactly the point that I am raising. Being a lifelong Wednesday fan builds character, as my nana
used to say, but it also helped me realise that football is wonderful. I am in no way anti-football. We love football; we are a footballing country. I am seeking fair play and a level playing field for police and football clubs. The clubs absolutely can do more. We do not want to go back to the bad old days of 30 or 40 years ago, which some of us will remember, when football was not the family game we have now successfully made it. That is really what I want to get over to the Minister today.

To conclude, I will not let up campaigning for police funding to tackle knife crime and to better protect our communities, but I hope that today’s debate raises some important issues for us to consider. Will the Minister outline what the Government will do to share the costs more reasonably between the large clubs and our police forces? In that way, we can not only ensure that football events are properly policed, but support our local police services and ensure that they have sufficient resources to meet all the demands that are placed upon them.

6.12 pm

Peter Aldous (Waveney) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I am most grateful to you, the hon. Member for Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough (Gill Furniss) and the Minister for allowing me to say a few words. At the outset I must declare an interest, in that I am a lifelong supporter of Ipswich Town, I am a season ticket holder and a shareholder, although those shares are worthless following the club’s administration and the subsequent sale of a controlling interest in the club to the Marcus Evans Group in 2007.

The 2018–19 season goes down as the worst in the club’s history, as we finished rock bottom of the championship. Next season, we shall play outside the top two divisions for the first time in 62 years. In that period, we have achieved a great deal. Under the management of two football knights—Sir Alf Ramsey and Sir Bobby Robson—we won the league championship, the FA cup and the UEFA cup. We are the only British club never to lose a home tie in a mainstream European club competition—a record, I sense, we may well retain in perpetuity.

Ipswich’s 2018–19 annus horribilis is not the only recent stain on the club’s reputation. I am afraid we are one of the reasons for the hon. Lady having to secure a debate on this matter. It was Ipswich Town, under the ownership of Marcus Evans, that took Suffolk constabulary to court, and in so doing overturned the principle whereby police forces were able to charge for the deployment of officers on land “owned, leased or controlled” by football clubs. That ruling changed the interpretation of the word “controlled”. Land outside the stadium that is used by a football club, such as to facilitate the entrance and exit of supporters, for granting concessions, such as to burger vans, or for restricting vehicle access by way of temporary road restriction orders, is now defined as “public land”. Police forces are unable to charge full cost recovery on such areas.

I should briefly explain what happens at Ipswich on match days. A few hours before the match until a few hours afterwards, two public roads—Portman Road and Sir Alf Ramsey Way—that immediately adjoin the ground are closed to traffic. They, in effect, become part of the stadium. In the court case, Suffolk constabulary’s contention was that policing the roads during those periods is inseparably linked to activities taking place inside the stadium, and thus they fall within Ipswich Town’s responsibility. To me, that seems a logical conclusion. While in many ways I am not qualified to question the court’s ruling, its decision appears perverse.

At Ipswich, the away supporters are seated in the Cobbold stand, which is on Portman Road. A potential trouble hotspot for policing is the junction between Portman Road and Sir Alf Ramsey Way, where home and away fans mingle. That risk was heightened in the matches with Leeds United in the past two seasons. Season ticket holders were moved from their seats in the Cobbold stand so that the whole upper tier could be used by away fans, which generated additional income for Ipswich Town.

In that context, it is wrong that Suffolk police are currently not able to recover in full the cost of policing Portman Road and Sir Alf Ramsey Way. For the two matches against Leeds United, it was necessary for them to deploy additional resources, including mounted police from a neighbouring force. The system before the court case, which had operated since 2012, worked well and thus I urge the Government to bring forward legislation as soon as practically possible. I think there would be strong support from all parts of the House for embedding the previous 2012 framework in statute as soon as possible.

6.17 pm

The Minister for Policing and the Fire Service (Mr Nick Hurd): It is a huge pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone, and to respond to a debate secured by the hon. Member for Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough (Gill Furniss). I was delighted to be shadowed by her when I was Minister with responsibility for industry. I know she is passionate about steel and Sheffield, but we now learn that she has long had the character-forming habit of supporting Sheffield Wednesday. There was a whiff of nostalgia in the air during the debate, which has taken us back to the glory days of Sheffield Wednesday and Ipswich Town. I declare an interest: I am a proud but disappointed Spurs fan. I am ably supported by my hon. Friend the Member for Chichester (Gillian Keegan), who is a proud and exhilarated Scouser.

Three issues underlie this important debate. First, are the public more or less safe in attending a football match? That matters. Secondly, are we in the right place with regard to the role of the police and how they recover their costs for their work at football games? Thirdly, there is the much bigger issue of whether the police have the support they need to do difficult and invaluable work on our behalf. I hope to address all three issues in the time I have.

First, are the public more or less safe in attending a football match now? The answer has to be yes, they are safer. The hon. Member for Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough alluded to that when she harked back to the bad old days of the ‘70s and ‘80s, when the beautiful game was marred by what we saw and heard in our football stadiums and arenas. They are a completely different place now. The number of football-related arrests has reduced steadily since 2000 and is down 50% since 2010. We now have a combination of preventive
football banning orders, targeting, public order policing, stadium ejections and modern in-stadium security. Frankly, there have also been changes in supporter attitudes. We are in a different place, as a result of very good work over the years by the Government, football authorities, football clubs, the police and fans. Everyone has played their part.

We must keep this in perspective, but a minority of supporters will always be prepared to organise violence, engage in disorder and, as the hon. Lady rightly pointed out, indulge in racism, homophobia and hate crime. That is where we are, so of course the police need to continue to be involved in keeping the peace around big football games. I will now address how that works, and how they recover costs.

As the hon. Lady pointed out, the police can charge for special police services under section 25 of the Police Act 1996. Legislation and case law—a point raised powerfully by my hon. Friend for Waveney (Peter Aldous)—means that the police can claim back only those preventive policing costs that were incurred on land owned by football clubs, which in practice normally means inside the grounds, and they must be asked to do such policing by the club. The result is that football clubs often rely on stewards inside the grounds, with the police waiting outside, ready to be called in. That means that the cost of the police is borne by the taxpayer.

What does that mean for costs? The hon. Member for Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough rightly reported the costs relayed to us by the police. I pay tribute to the work of Deputy Chief Constable Mark Roberts, who was passionate and assiduous in pressing Ministers at the Home Office on the issue, and in making the case for rethinking how the partnership between police and football works. The numbers presented to us are exactly those presented by the hon. Lady. The police estimate a cost of around £48 million a year, of which they feel they can recover just over £5 million, leaving a £42 million shortfall. That is a significant number when broken down into the number of police officers, for example, and as the Minister with responsibility for the police, I am concerned about that.

The hon. Lady made a point that I think everyone will understand about the enormous amounts of money in the game or, more specifically, at the top of the game. People will rightly wonder why on earth rich football clubs do not do more to contribute to the costs of policing their games, given how much money they earn from them. The hon. Lady was typically thoughtful in her approach. She did not have much time for the arguments of the Premier League in this context, but we should recognise and place on the record that my colleagues at the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport negotiate with the football leagues a very significant—£100 million a year—contribution to grassroots projects.

The Premier League pays a great deal of tax. Football supporters are taxpayers—indeed, they will argue that they are entitled to a service—and the Premier League will ask why football should be singled out in this context. Those are all arguments to be had and to be made. I give a commitment to the hon. Lady, and to other interested colleagues, that I will meet the Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, my hon. Friend the Member for Eastleigh (Mims Davies), next week to talk specifically and exclusively about how we can structure a better, fairer partnership between police and football and, in doing so, reduce the demand on police resources. I am open-minded about how we do that, including about looking at all current frameworks and arrangements.

My third and final point is that we have to put this conversation into the much bigger picture of the funding and resources available to the police. The hon. Member for Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough referred to this directly and made political points about it. The £42 million shortfall, if the number from the police is accurate, sits in the context of the £14 billion a year that we taxpayers invest in our police system. The honest truth is that we are asking more and more of our police. The police are extremely stretched. Yes, there continues to be scope to improve their efficiency, but I have been persuaded, almost since I started as Minister with responsibility for the police almost two years ago, that they are too stretched, and that we as a society and as a Government need to give them more support. That has been my priority ever since I have been in the job.

As a result of that work, and the support of successive Home Secretaries and senior colleagues, we as a country are investing over £2 billion more in our police system this year than three years ago. I agreed with almost everything that the hon. Lady said, but I am afraid that she was playing some old tunes from the Labour jukebox around cuts to policing. The music has changed: the Government have recognised the pressure on the police. The demand on the police has risen and become increasingly complex, and they are too stretched and need more support from us and from the taxpayer.

Overall, crime is stable. Some crime is rising, but police work is becoming increasingly complex and resource intensive. They need more support, and we absolutely get that. I have been very clear on that as the Policing Minister. There will be an additional £1 billion this year—£2 billion more than three years ago. For South Yorkshire Police, that is an additional £16 million this year, on top of three years of special grant funding of £24 million, and an additional £2.5 million this year to support the work against serious violence to which the hon. Lady referred. I am sure that she will welcome the fact that the chief constable is recruiting more officers in South Yorkshire, though she will argue that more needs to be done. For what it is worth, I agree.

Although we have made considerable progress in securing more resource for the police, looking forward to the comprehensive spending review and considering what is likely to happen in terms of the demand on the police, I am clear that we need to go further. I am delighted to have the support of the Home Secretary, who has made it crystal clear, explicitly and in public, that should he remain Home Secretary, which is not the summit of his ambitions at the moment, he will prioritise police funding in the Home Office bid for the comprehensive spending review.

I reassure the hon. Member for Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough that we are working more closely than ever with the police on building a credible bid to secure additional resources, so that they can: increase their capacity and capabilities, which is necessary; do
more crime prevention, which is necessary; upgrade their technology, which is necessary; and give better support to frontline officers—the most important assets in the police system—which is necessary. Those are all necessary conditions if the police are to improve the service that they deliver to our constituents and the public. That improvement is necessary given the rapidly shifting picture of rising demand on the police. I am committed, as I know the Home Secretary is, to doing more to support the police in that way.

On the points about funding and football, I make the following commitment: I will sit down with the Minister with responsibility for sport next week to discuss further what we can do as a Government to get a better balance in this relationship, to make the partnership between police and football work more effectively, and to reduce the cost on policing. We should keep things in perspective; going to a football match is a lot safer than it was many years ago, and it is a much more enjoyable environment. The police do extremely important work in that area, and will continue to do so.

We must get the structure right. I am not persuaded that we are in the right place at the moment, and I value the debate, and the contribution made by the hon. Member for Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough and other Members. She has my full undertaking that I will follow this matter up next week. Critically, when it comes to the comprehensive spending review, I fully intend to build on the work of the last two years in ensuring that our police officers and police system have the support that they need to do such incredibly important work on our behalf.

Question put and agreed to.

Education Funding

6.29 pm

Gordon Henderson (Sittingbourne and Sheppey) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered education funding.

It is a genuine pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. As hon. Members know, there are lies, damned lies and statistics, but following the letter I received in April from the Secretary of State for Education about school results and resourcing, nationally and in Kent, I am tempted to add Department for Education briefings on school funding to that list.

To begin with a positive reaction to that three-page letter, my constituency is in Kent, so mention of our county was an encouraging start. To be fair, the letter contained information that was, on the face of it, good news. For example, 91% of children in Kent attend schools rated good or outstanding, compared with just 64% in 2010. In addition, 67% of Kent pupils reached the expected standard of reading, writing and maths at key stage 2, compared with 65% nationally. So far, so good. Except that when we consider what is happening on the ground in my constituency, those county-wide figures hide an inconvenient truth.

Let us take the standard of reading. A ward in my constituency is in the bottom 100 of 10,000 local council wards in England for adult literacy. That is an historical, long-term problem that will be solved only by targeted intervention and extra funding for adult education. A couple of years ago, I decided to try to do something about it, so as a first step I approached a local housing association to see if we could identify adults in our area who needed help. Our plan was to set up local clubs that would allow volunteer mentors to teach illiterate adults how to read and write. The stumbling block, as always, was the lack of funds. When I wrote to the Department for help, I was told that no grant funding was available. Those illiterate people in my constituency had been let down by the education system when they were at school as children, and they are still being let down by the system as adults.

Andrea Jenkyns (Morley and Outwood) (Con): Research by the Institute for Fiscal Studies shows that per-pupil funding has been squeezed, particularly for 16 to 18-year-olds. Does my hon. Friend agree that the Government should make that a priority, especially to enhance social mobility in the areas he is discussing?

Gordon Henderson: I agree; I will come to the national funding formula later, if my hon. Friend will bear with me.

I will continue my thread about illiteracy, which is a huge problem in my constituency. We had several skills companies in my area, which taught adults basic literacy in preparation for the vocational training that they provided. Because of the new funding system for skills providers, however, which discriminates against constituencies such as mine, one of those companies had to close and another is struggling financially.

The Secretary of State’s letter boasted that in Kent, an extra 27,300 school places have been added since 2010, including the establishment of 10 free schools, and that a further 13 new schools have been cleared to
be created in coming years. Again, however, that statistic hides an inconvenient truth, which is that many schools in my constituency are bursting at the seams, particularly the secondary schools in Sittingbourne, where an already dire situation is being made worse by the ludicrous independent appeals procedure.

One of my local schools has a published admission number of 285 pupils, but because of the shortage of places in Sittingbourne secondary schools, and following a request from Kent County Council, the head agreed to increase this year’s intake to 330. In turn, Kent County Council committed to fund the building of a new classroom block to accommodate the extra 45 children. During the building work, which is due to start in the summer, four classrooms will have to be decommissioned, but despite that, the school was confident that it would be able to accommodate the additional pupils.

Then the independent appeals panel stepped in. It heard appeals from 53 parents who wanted to send their children to that school. Bizarrely, it upheld all 53 appeals, so the school is faced with finding accommodation for a total intake of 383 pupils. The knock-on effect of such a dramatic increase is horrendous. The head’s first question is, if there was room to build additional accommodation—which, incidentally, there is not—who would fund it? Nobody has been able to answer that question yet. Kent County Council has made it clear that it will not borrow any more money to fund the building of additional schools or buildings. Quite rightly, it believes that the Government should fund those schools via the basic need grant system.

Other secondary schools in Sittingbourne face a similar situation of demand outstripping the number of available places. That problem was brought about by the rapid population increase in my constituency, which was driven by Government housing targets that were imposed without any additional Government funds being allocated to ensure that the necessary infrastructure was put in place first. It is all very well for the Department to claim that there is a shortage of places. Frankly, without the funding to provide more schools where places are needed, the statistic is meaningless.

On funding, the Secretary of State talks in his letter about the 2019-20 national funding formula allocation to Kent and explains that the county will get £3,793 per primary pupil and £4,941 per secondary pupil. Those figures graphically illustrate the historical underfunding of Kent schools, which is put into sharp relief by the comparable funding figures in Greenwich, which are £4,907 per primary pupil and £6,698 per secondary pupil. Hon. Members might point out that Greenwich is an outer London borough with areas of deep social deprivation, but I have news for them: Kent is not entirely made up of affluent areas such as Sevenoaks and Tunbridge Wells. Many areas, particularly in Thanet and Swale where my constituency is, have council wards with social deprivation as deep as any found in outer London.

To take another example, I am sure that hon. Members agree that Essex is a comparable county to Kent; indeed, we are neighbours, albeit separated by the Thames estuary. Essex is due to receive £3,843 per primary pupil and £5,018 per secondary pupil. I appreciate that they are not huge differences individually, but they make a big difference to school budgets collectively. Why does the Department think that Kent pupils cost less to teach than those in Essex? They do not—indeed, the reverse is often the case—but the difference highlights a long-standing funding deficiency for Kent schools. The figures speak for themselves.

Ms Esther McVey: I agree with my right hon. Friend. As a proud man of Kent, and a Kent MP who is doing the best for my constituency, I want to focus on Kent, but I understand that she will have problems in her constituency as well.

The figures speak for themselves. In terms of schools block funding, Kent is ranked 139 out of 152 local authorities. How can that be right or fair, particularly when we consider Kent’s location, so close to London, with all the cost pressures that that entails? As we move towards implementation of the national funding formula, Kent will still be 7% below the national average, while inner London boroughs will be 32% above the national average, which means that per pupil funding in inner London will be £1,774 more than in Kent.

That leads me on to another problem that faces many Kent schools, including those in my own area—one that I have raised before in this House and will no doubt raise again and again, until something is done about it. London boroughs are buying up or renting homes in our area into which they place homeless families, many of whom have special social and educational needs. Although the London boroughs pay the housing costs for the families, it is Kent social services and Kent schools that are expected to meet the costs of providing the social and educational help that they need. London boroughs are also increasingly placing cared-for children into Kent, once again without providing the financial support needed to look after and educate those children.

Let me make it very clear that schools in Kent willingly accept their responsibility and meet the financial commitment needed to educate those children. However, their benevolence is putting an additional strain on already stretched school budgets. The strain is particularly acute when it comes to providing special educational needs support. There is already severe pressure on the high needs funding block, and that is being made worse by the ever-increasing number of children in Kent who require SEN support.

The letter from the Secretary of State presented a rosy picture of education funding that simply does not reflect what is actually happening in our schools, nor the problems they face.

Wera Hobhouse: The chief executive of a multi-academy trust in my constituency, Gary Lewis, says that next year there will be no A-level French or
making our country poorer. Does the hon. Gentleman agree with me?

Gordon Henderson: I do agree. I sympathise with the hon. Lady when it comes to schools losing the opportunity to teach their children German. I want to get my schools teaching proper English. That is one of the problems we face. We face illiteracy not because people cannot speak German in Sittingbourne and Sheppey, but because they cannot read and write English.

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): I have teachers in Brighton who are absolutely desperate because they can no longer provide the kind of SEN support they used to be able to. There was a wonderful programme called “Every Child a Reader”, and one of the teachers from Brighton came up to the House of Lords to celebrate taking part in that project. They have now been sacked, and the project no longer works, because they cannot fund it. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that there is a particular irony in that? When there are good projects like that, and we see that they are doing good work, it is an absolute tragedy that they cannot continue.

Gordon Henderson: I am sure that the hon. Lady is right and that many other Members have similar stories to tell. I would just say this about the outlook being presented by the Department for Education: all is not rosy in the garden of England.

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree with me that one of the problems is that the special schools in all our constituencies are having to contend with a level of demand and complexity that simply was not there 10 years ago? We need to make sure that the funding is there to meet the need that exists.

Gordon Henderson: I agree, but I do so hesitantly, as I have a very good special school in my area, which teaches children with acute physical disabilities. We have now been told by the DFE that my constituency is to get funding for another special school for people with learning difficulties. I am immensely grateful for that, because currently 70 children from my constituency have to travel to the other side of Maidstone every day—some get up at half past 6 or 7 o’clock in the morning and do not get home until half past 5 in the evening—to attend a special school there. I agree, but I do so slightly reluctantly because I am going to get some funds for a special school in my constituency.

I would like to list some of the other problems that headteachers in my constituency say they face, in no particular order. First, they tell me that there is a need for an increase in the overall funding for schools, which should be coupled with a long-term plan that would ensure that the growth in our population is properly addressed. That is very pertinent to my constituency. Secondly, they want to scrap the current system of requesting a three-year forecast from schools without providing any firm information about likely costs and incomes. Thirdly, we need to find a solution to the growing problem of poor mental health among students and staff, which is coupled with a lack of funding to help those who suffer. Fourthly, headteachers in my constituency are frustrated when they see the DFE focusing on workload reduction while insisting on schools cutting their costs, which inevitably reduces the workforce and increases workloads for the remaining staff. Fifthly, they feel pressurised by the funding arrangements into replacing experienced teachers in order to save money.

Sixthly, headteachers have to manage the impact on school budgets of unfunded mandatory costs, such as the increase in the pay level of support staff brought about by an increase in the living wage. Seventhly, headteachers often struggle to fund the £6,000 needed for each education, health and care plan, and to find the additional money involved in preparing those plans. Eighthly, inflationary pressures continue to undermine any increases to school funding under the new national funding formula. The so-called fair funding formula is simply not fair.

Ninthly, schools are having to divert scarce resources to cover services that were previously supplied by either local authorities or the NHS, and no longer are. Finally, research has found that Kent schools have lost £149.5 million between 2015 and 2019, which averages out at £270 per pupil. Some 510 out of 535 schools in Kent have experienced cuts. One secondary school in my constituency has lost £780,000.

I am lucky in Sittingbourne and Sheppey to have some fantastic, committed school leaders and teachers. However, I fear that without a real boost in investment and funding better targeted to areas where it is most needed such as mine, we are going to lose our best educators to better resourced areas, which would be to the detriment of the children in my constituency.

I know the Education Minister, and I am sure that, in their heart of hearts, he and his colleagues understand the financial challenges faced by schools and that they are lobbying the Treasury hard. I just hope the Chancellor—whoever that turns out to be in November—listens and delivers more money for education in this year’s Budget.

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): Order. The debate can last until 7.30 pm. I am obliged to call the Front Benchers no later than 7.12 pm. The guideline limits are five minutes for Her Majesty’s Opposition and 10 minutes for the Minister, and then Mr Henderson has two or three minutes at the end to sum up the debate. Until 7.12 pm, we are in Back-Bench time. There are six Members seeking to contribute—I have a galaxy of talent before me—and I am determined that everybody should have the chance to speak, so there will have to be a time limit of three and a half minutes. That way, everybody will get in. The first contributor will be Kate Green.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I congratulate the hon. Member for Sittingbourne and Sheppey (Gordon Henderson) on securing the debate; I agreed with much of what he said.
[Kate Green]

In the spring term, I conducted a survey of headteachers in my constituency to ask about funding pressures in their schools, and the majority were very pessimistic about their prospects over the coming three years. They spoke of having to cut support for vulnerable learners, of the impact of having to make support staff redundant, of having to cut classes—for example, music and swimming lessons—or having to ask parents to pay for lessons, and of the impact that that is having on staff morale. What is worse is that it is the schools serving the most disadvantaged and deprived intakes that are suffering some of the greatest funding pressures, in part for the reasons that the hon. Gentleman rightly raised. The local newspaper, the Messenger, reported that four of the five worst affected schools in Trafford, in terms of losing funding, are in my constituency. Those include Broadoak School and Lostock College, which serve particularly disadvantaged intakes and have suffered a real-terms loss in funding of almost £1,000 per pupil since 2015.

The situation is exacerbated by the fact that Trafford—I know this is true for other colleagues—is one of the f40 authorities, which have particularly suffered under the new national funding formula. Although previous Secretaries of State for Education have made efforts to address the inequities that existed, it cannot be right that schools in my constituency in Old Trafford, which serve very similar demographics to those in Salford or Manchester just across the road, should be so poorly funded. That is not to decry the very real need for funding of schools in those boroughs. We must address the fact that the funding formula is still not delivering for poorer and more disadvantaged communities in overall wealthier authorities, or for some of the schools that the hon. Gentleman spoke about.

Laura Smith (Crewe and Nantwich) (Lab): My hon. Friend obviously shares my concern about reports that vulnerable children are being denied access to education because schools are not being given adequate resources. Does she agree that the recent demonstrations—the protests by young people and parents—highlight the enormous strength of feeling about this issue?

Kate Green: The feeling is shared by teachers, students, parents, governors and, indeed, the wider community; my hon. Friend is absolutely right.

My final point in the very short time I have left is that the situation in my borough is even further exacerbated by our selective secondary system. The House is well aware that I am deeply opposed to it, but this is not a debate about the merits or demerits of our selective education system due to the budgetary issues. The money is there, but it is not being allocated in the way that it should be. I strongly urge the Minister to look again at whether putting funding into the grammar system is the best way of improving the life chances of our poorest and most high-need kids.

6.54 pm

John Howell (Henley) (Con): On the Wednesday before the recess, I submitted a petition to the House that had been signed by just under 1,000 residents of Henley. I will not read it out, but I hope the Minister will agree that it is a friendly petition. I am concerned about the gap between the enormous figures that are increasingly being put into education and what is actually happening on the ground in schools. The petition asked for a review in advance of the comprehensive spending review to settle once and for all what it costs to run education and how we can get that money to schools.

We have tackled a number of issues separately—we have tackled teachers’ pay and pensions, and agreed to fund them—but we need to know in what other areas funding is falling short in the squeeze that has occurred between keeping the budgets more or less as they are and inflation. Every year, the Minister makes the honest claim that we are spending more on the revenue budget for schools than we were the previous year. That is a very laudable thing to have done, provided the money actually gets to the schools themselves.

One of the things that will help is to bring out the difference between a soft formula and a hard formula. We have a soft formula at the moment, and local authorities have a role in distributing and, indeed, top-slicing the funds before they get to the school. It might be thought that they do not top-slice very much, but they do, and it can make a big difference to the schools. That also applies to schools that are part of multi-academy trusts. We must ensure that, in creating such trusts, we are not just creating another local authority equivalent that is able to top-slice more and more funds, resulting in schools getting less and less. A review and a move to a hard funding formula would be a very good way forward.

I will finish on a completely different matter. Apprenticeships form a large part of further education colleges’ income. In the Henley constituency, I am organising an evening to bring together schools and businesses in order to see what apprenticeships they want to fund and how they can be funded.

6.57 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Member for Sittingbourne and Sheppey (Gordon Henderson) on raising this issue. Although I realise that this is a devolved matter in Northern Ireland—the Minister knows that—I want to add to the debate to show how far these issues go in the United Kingdom. Indeed, they go as far as Northern Ireland.

Northern Ireland is recognised worldwide as having one of the best education systems. I have said many times over the years that I take great pride in that, but we are in danger of losing our wonderful education system due to the budgetary issues. The money is there, but it is not being allocated in the way that it should be.

I see a budgetary allocation that leads to parent teacher associations fundraising to pay for classroom assistants’ wages, rather than buy additional extras that enhance the children’s education. I see primary and post-primary schools being forced to take classes up to
the statutory maximum without adequate support, as they need every penny of funding for children to make ends meet. I see staffing issues, such as staff being instructed by their unions not to organise after-hours meetings or run after-school clubs, or staff having to cross the picket line—such is their love for their children. I see qualified teachers working as classroom assistants or subbing for two days. When older teachers on the top pay band retire and are replaced by a new teacher, the savings should go to the school, not to the board that is negotiating the exit package. I see education authorities and boards with sufficient funds to send staff on team-building days. At the same time, I see headteachers attempting to teach classes as well as run their school. I see PI parents being asked to bring in baby wipes and toilet rolls, as the school is no longer in a position to supply them.

I thank God for the parent teacher associations, the teachers and classroom assistants who work well beyond their paid hours, and the music volunteers who teach at no cost to the school. That does not make me less ashamed of the predicament of our education system because of the unwise and reduced allocation of funding. The stress on headteachers who are trying to balance the books is a disgrace. Only love for their school and their pupils would allow anyone to do that work.

We need to allocate an acceptable level of funding per child, as determined by their school's area. I am concerned about the strain on teachers and schools to provide a world-class education that they can provide only with a decent budget. The Northern Ireland Affairs Committee has conducted an inquiry into the education system in Northern Ireland because the Assembly is not functioning correctly. I know that it is not the Minister's responsibility to answer to those things, but they tell us about the crisis in education across the United Kingdom.

Let the PTA fundraise for school outings or for the latest gadget for the school. Let the Education Authority do its job by paying for the heating, lights, teachers, classroom assistants, cleaners and dinner staff, and the pens and paper. It was not too much for the Government to provide for my education during my time in the education system in Northern Ireland, so why does it seem so far out of the grasp of the Education Authority right now?

7.1 pm

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): The spring statement came and went, and I am still here making the plea for the worst-funded schools in the country, which are in York. We cannot go on like this; we have had many debates about funding for schools in this Chamber, but the situation does not improve. Schools are struggling more and more every week, which I experience as I talk to schools across York.

There are particular things that need urgent attention, such as the capital funding of many of our schools. Some schools are crumbling, such as Tang Hall Primary, where the children are so cold as they study, or Carr Junior School, which desperately needs building upgrades but is unable to access the funding it needs. All Saints Roman Catholic School, a secondary school, is on a split site and needs a new location in which to educate its children.

I want to focus on disadvantage. In my constituency, Tang Hall Primary, which as I mentioned needs infrastructure upgrades, saw a spending drop of £559 per pupil, whereas in more affluent areas of the city, the drop was smaller. The Government funding formula is therefore punishing disadvantage and the children who most need resources to advance their education. That is driving inequality into the system for the long term.

In York, we already have real issues, with an attainment gap of 31 points—the largest attainment gap in the country—as well as the worst funding. I say again to the Minister that the two are correlated. I still wait for a response and for recognition of that fact. The cuts across the city are resulting in some of the largest increases in class sizes in the country and the biggest reduction in staff numbers. Those facts cannot be denied.

It is the wider impact that that is having on children's opportunities and on their health and wellbeing that causes me the most concern. A secondary school in my constituency wants to employ more mental health staff to support the children. I recognise that schools might not have had to deal with those challenges a decade ago, but they do have to deal with them now. It is therefore incumbent on the Minister to ensure that schools are properly resourced to ensure the holistic wellbeing of the children. Only when that is in place will children be able to learn as best they can.

I will turn to my secondary schools. Archbishop Holgate’s School, for instance, will not have the capacity to teach children next year, because of the expansion of class sizes and the demands on space. South Bank Academy is also struggling for space, yet the Government have just refused to build a new school in York.

We are struggling and it is time that the Minister recognised the challenges faced by different places in the country, instead of hiding behind figures and saying, “More money is going into schools.” We recognise that they can talk about headline figures, but the money is not going to the right places. Per pupil funding is falling in real terms. That is the basis of the debate; per pupil funding is falling in real terms. It is widely known that it has fallen by 8.8%.

The issue of general funding is beginning to sound a bit like a broken record. The Government claim to spend record amounts on education, but claiming to spend a pound more this year than last year is irrelevant, because it is meaningless in real terms. That is the basis of the debate; per pupil funding is falling in real terms. It is widely known that it has fallen by 8.8%.

The Government have succeeded in delegating the risk and responsibility entirely to schools. Warwickshire is 120th of 140 in the funding per pupil rankings and is one of the worst-off areas in the country. Although Warwickshire does not have it as tough as what my hon. Friend the Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell) illustrated, it has it tough none the less, and is a member of the f40.
I do not want to dwell on other areas of education—we have recently had debates about nursery education and further education, which have also suffered severe cuts—but will illustrate some of the challenges in our primary, secondary and special needs education sectors. Just 10 days ago, I visited one of the best primary schools in Warwickshire. The headteacher just sat there frustrated, saying, “This afternoon I will have to decide how to cut £50,000 from our budget. That is a further £50,000 and I am not sure who I will have to let go.” Those are the real challenges faced by the headteachers and leadership teams across our schools.

I spoke to one of my secondary schools a couple of months ago and it said that in the past three years it has had to cut 11 full-time teachers, leading to larger class sizes. The remaining teachers have to cover their colleagues who are off sick. The school has had to make cuts in associate staff in the back office and in frontline services, such as teaching assistants.

Schools face the consequences of austerity because of cuts to wider public services. Just this week, one school said that because of the cuts to the council’s children’s services, it has closed yet another case. The responsibility to pick up the pieces of a very challenging situation will now fall to that school, bringing over greater pressures. It had to lose its school counsellor last term. It is faced with a dilemma: does it replace that counsellor or invest in support for students with the most complex needs?

One of our fine special needs schools in south Warwick has had to lose its comfort dog, half its playground and its minibus, which it cannot afford to replace, because of the cuts that it faces. Those are some of the most vulnerable children in our society, and they are being hurt the hardest. That is just not right.

Our sixth forms have seen cuts of 24% to their budgets and a reduction in their choices. One of my sixth forms has had to close. Education is an investment not just in our young people, but in our future. It is time that we invested in them, stopped the cuts and held a review of the fair funding formula.

7.8 pm

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): I congratulate the hon. Member for Sittingbourne and Sheppey (Gordon Henderson) on securing this important debate. My experience in Brighton and Hove echoes the many stories that we have heard from around the country. It is quite clear that our schools are buckling under the pressure to do more with less. With their general budgets savaged by more than 8% in real terms, it is not surprising that they have to make devastating cuts.

As the hon. Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell) said, we have this debate time and again. The Government tell us that austerity is supposed to be over, so let us see that in our schools. Right now, our schools know that Ministers are not being straight when they say that they are spending more per pupil or in real terms; actually, less is being spent per pupil and in real terms, and any attempt to say otherwise glosses over a serious and damaging crisis.

Headteachers in Brighton write to me regularly and in desperate terms about the sleepless nights that they face because of the impact of the funding crisis on their ability to support pupils, particularly those with complex needs. The Local Government Association identified a potential £1.6 billion deficit in special needs education funding but the Government responded with an inadequate £350 million. Headteachers say that is obviously too little, too late.

These are the kinds of things that headteachers have said:

“We have less support staff than we need to run the school effectively and give the children the support they need”, and

“We will have to drop our counsellor service.”

One described “having sleepless nights trying...to make the budget work”, and another said:

“We have already closed our nursery, reduced staffing through redundancies and not replacing those who have moved on to save money. The support we have for children with special needs is now at a basic level particularly for those who struggle socially and emotionally.”

I have many more quotes from our teachers, who are struggling so much to make ends meet. The Minister needs to listen far more closely to them.

I want to say a word about sixth-form funding. Sixth forms, too, are in a difficult position, with huge funding pressures. I have two fantastic sixth-form colleges in my constituency: BHASVIC, the Brighton, Hove and Sussex Sixth Form College; and Varndean College. Funding for 16 to 18-year-olds has also been savagely cut: according to research by London Economics, in real terms, sixth-form colleges received about £1,300 less per student in 2016-17 than they did in 2010-11. That is a 22% decline in funding. The Institute for Fiscal Studies said:

“Funding per student aged 16-18 has seen the biggest squeeze of all stages of education for young people in recent years.”

At the same time, costs have risen, the needs of students have become more complex, and Government are asking more of school and colleges. The purchasing power of sixth-form funding has been hugely diminished as a result. I am sure that the Minister has seen the powerful funding impact survey by the Sixth Form Colleges Association, which makes genuinely shocking reading. It reports that 50% of schools and colleges are dropping modern foreign languages, and 34% are dropping STEM—science, technology, engineering and maths—subjects. The only way to address that funding crisis in 16-to-18 education is to raise the rate per student. I implore the Minister to do that, and to listen to the many people who say exactly the same.

7.11 pm

Mike Kane (Wythenshawe and Sale East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I congratulate the hon. Member for Sittingbourne and Sheppey (Gordon Henderson) on securing this timely and important debate. I thank everyone else for contributing, including my constituency neighbour, my hon. Friend the Member for Stretford and Urmston (Kate Green). To make a parochial point, at least Trafford now has a majority Labour council, under the superb leadership of Councillor Andrew Western; that will mitigate some of the pressures on schools in our borough. I also thank the hon. Members for Henley (John Howell), for Strangford (Jim Shannon), and for Brighton, Pavilion
According to research in England, only last week, concerned parents and experienced cuts across the board. Since 2015, the Chancellor of the Exchequer and the Education Secretary have both stated in the main Chamber that every school has seen the Minister smiling, but that gets us towards that statement, that would go on for five years. I make that £15 billion. I pledged an extra £3 billion a year, in a spending spree that the Minister will like: he can see the Minister smiling, but that flies in the face of reality. Our schools have both stated in the main Chamber that every school funding should be protected “in real terms”. There are no facts or figures behind that statement, but he obviously does not want the truth to get in the way of a good story on education.

The right hon. Member for Surrey Heath (Michael Gove), a former Education Secretary, said that he wants £1 billion extra, but this Government took £5 billion out of the system. He plucked another figure out of the air, just as he threw this country’s education system up in the air in 2010 and let it shatter. We are still trying to reassemble the pieces.

The right hon. Member for Forest of Dean (Mr Harper) said that some of that £20 billion extra going into our NHS should be used for our schools, which is robbing Peter to pay Paul. This is my favourite: the right hon. Member for Esher and Walton (Dominic Raab) wants private companies to run schools for a profit—so it will not just be the NHS that is open to trade negotiations. The right hon. Member for West Suffolk (Matt Hancock) made a spending pledge that the Minister will like: he pledged an extra £3 billion a year, in a spending spree that would go on for five years. I make that £15 billion. I can see the Minister smiling, but that gets us towards where we need to be.

We can be in no doubt that schools are in crisis. The Chancellor of the Exchequer and the Education Secretary have both stated in the main Chamber that every school in England will see a cash-terms increase in their funding, but that flies in the face of reality. Our schools have experienced cuts across the board. Since 2015, the Government have cut £2.7 billion from school budgets in England. Only last week, concerned parents and teachers protested in their thousands about cuts to special educational needs provision. According to research by the National Education Union, such provision in England is down by £1.2 billion, because of shortfalls in funding increases from the Government since 2015. The Government’s own data show that 4,000 children or young people with an education, health and care plan or statement were awaiting provision in January 2018. In other words, they were waiting for a place in education.

As we have heard in Members’ stories today, the cuts mean that teachers are buying essential supplies, bringing in breakfast cereals for food-hungry children, and having to source shoes, uniforms and coats for children whose parents can no longer afford to provide them. Schools are starting late or closing early to save money, and the curriculum is narrowing. There is a crisis in our schools and this Government are turning a blind eye to it. They have made a concerted effort to fudge the figures, and to deflect attention from the school funding cuts over which they have presided. Across the country, schools are having to write to parents to ask for money to buy basic resources. They need money not for little extras, but for essentials.

If funding per pupil had been maintained in value since 2015, school funding overall would be £5.1 billion higher now, so 91% of schools face real-terms cuts. People in this Chamber know all too well the impact on the ground. The average shortfall is more than £67,000 in primary school budgets, and more than £273,000 in secondary school budgets. Our schools have 137,000 more pupils, but 5,400 fewer teachers, 2,800 fewer teaching assistants, 1,400 fewer support staff, and 1,200 fewer auxiliary staff. The Government need to stop their sticking-plaster approach to school finances and and give schools the funding that they really need.

The right hon. Member for W est Suffolk (Matt Hancock) said that some of that £20 billion extra going into our economy, which has reduced the annual deficit from an unsustainable 10% of GDP, or some £150 billion a year, to 2% by 2018. The economic stability that that has provided has resulted in employment rising to record levels and unemployment being at its lowest level since the 1970s, halving youth unemployment and giving young people leaving school more opportunities to have jobs and start their careers.

It is that balanced approach that allows us to invest in public services and education. Core funding for schools and high needs has risen from almost £41 billion in 2017-18 to £43.5 billion this year. That includes the
[Nick Gibb]

extra £1.3 billion for schools and high needs announced in 2017, which we invested across 2018-19 and 2019-20, over and above plans set out in 2015. That means that, while we do recognise the budgeting challenges that schools have faced, funding remains high by historical standards. Figures from the Institute for Fiscal Studies show that real-terms per-pupil funding for five to 16-year-olds in 2020 will be more than 50% higher than it was in 2000. However, that does not mean that we do not understand the pressures that schools face.

We are committed to direct school funding where it is needed most. This is why, since April last year, we have started to distribute funding to schools through the national funding formula. The formula is a fairer way to distribute school funding because each area’s allocation takes into account the individual needs and characteristics of its schools and pupils. That means that, as indicated by my hon. Friend, Friend, Kent’s allocation will not be the same as that of an area where pupils have a greater amount of additional needs. It is right that schools with a higher proportion of pupils with additional needs, such as those indicated by deprivation or low prior attainment, should get extra funding.

My hon. Friend cited the overall average funding per pupil in Kent compared with Greenwich. Those figures are averages and reflect overall numbers of children with additional needs in those two local authority areas. In each authority, Greenwich and Kent, a child with particular additional needs will be funded on the same basis. The only difference between the funding that the pupils will attract will be the area cost adjustment, reflecting salary costs in the two areas. That represents about £831 million in overall funding out of the £34 billion school funding total. Areas will not receive the same amount, but they receive per pupil on the same basis.

I refer my hon. Friend and other hon. Members to the schedules that show how the national funding formula is made up. Local authorities will attract the same figure for every primary school pupil in 2019-20, regardless of where they are in the country, and the same figure for secondary and key stage 4. That represents about 73% of the total funding per pupil. The remaining 27% is made up of additional needs. For example, a pupil who has qualified for free school meals in the last six years will attract £540 in primary and £785 in secondary. If that secondary school pupil is in band D of the income deprivation affecting children index, they will attract another £515. If that secondary school pupil has low prior attainment based on primary school results, they will attract an additional £1,550. If that secondary school child has English as an additional language, they will attract an additional £1,385. That applies whether that pupil lives in Sheppey, Greenwich or York. The only difference will be that those figures are multiplied by the percentage area cost adjustment.1

Schools are already benefitting from the gains delivered by the national funding formula. Since 2017, we have given every local authority more money for every pupil in every school, while allocating the biggest increases to the schools that the previous system left most underfunded. This year, all schools have attracted an increase of at least 1% per pupil compared with their 2017-18 baselines and the most underfunded schools have attracted up to 6% more per pupil compared with 2017-18. A caveat to that is the point raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Henley (John Howell): the local authorities will receive that on the basis of the national funding formula, but we are still using the local formula to allocate that funding to schools. That is why there is a discrepancy between the national funding formula allocations and the actual amounts allocated to the schools. At the moment, we are allowing some discretion and flexibility in the system, so that local authorities can decide how that money is allocated to local authority areas.

Under the national formula, schools in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Sittingbourne and Sheppey will attract an extra 4.8% per pupil in 2019-20 compared with 2017-18. That is what Kent will receive for schools in his constituency. In the constituency of the hon. Member for Stretford and Urmston (Kate Green), schools will attract 2.6% more per pupil in 2019-20 compared with 2017-18. In York Central, schools will attract 5.4% more per pupil in 2019-20 compared with the baseline of 2017-18. The hon. Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell) mentioned Tang Hall Primary School. I add my congratulations to that school, where last year 77% of pupils achieved the expected standard in reading, writing and maths, compared with 64% nationally. They are above average in reading and well above average in writing.

Rachael Maskell: I appreciate that the Minister praises the hard work of the teachers in supporting children’s learning in that school; however, it is the 23% that I am most concerned about. That we have the largest attainment gap in the country while our funding is the lowest is of great concern.

Nick Gibb: I am concerned about that too. I want that 64% nationally to be significantly higher. That is the drive of this Government. Since 2010, standards have been rising. I am particularly proud of what we have achieved in reading in primary schools. Our nine-year-olds have achieved their highest ever score in the progress in international reading literacy study test—we rose from joint 10th to joint eighth between 2011 and 2016. I hope that, in the long term, that will address the real concerns expressed by my hon. Friend the Member for Sittingbourne and Sheppey.

My hon. Friend raised the issue of capital funding. Government funding for school places is based on local authorities’ own data; we fund the places that they report are needed. Local authorities can use that grant funding to provide places in new schools or through expansions of existing schools, and can work with any school in their local area in doing so. Kent has been allocated £328 million to provide new school places between 2011 and 2021. It is for Kent County Council to decide how to allocate that capital. Nationally, the Government have already committed £7 billion to create new school places between 2015 and 2021, which is on top of investment in the free schools programme. We are on track to create 1 million more school places this decade—the largest increase in school capacity in at least two generations.

As important as the funding that schools receive is how they spend those resources. It is essential that we do all that we can to help schools to make the most of every pound. That is why we have set out a strategy to support schools to make savings on the more than £10 billion they spend each year on non-staffing costs.

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That strategy provides schools with practical advice on how to identify potential savings, including deals to buy energy, computers and so on.

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): Order. I am afraid we have run out of time; this is the equivalent of the school bell having rung. The Minister may want to send his remarks to the Members present. I call Gordon Henderson to give his closing remarks.

7.27 pm

Gordon Henderson: Thank you, Mr Hollobone. I intend to be brief, so the Minister could probably have finished his speech. I would like to thank all the Members who have taken the trouble to come along to the debate. Westminster Hall debates are often difficult if only the Minister is present. I am delighted that more people have shown an interest.

I thank the Minister for his response. He gave us a lot of statistics—I refer to my opening speech, in which I talked about lies, damned lies and statistics—and I will read Hansard with great interest to take them in more fully. I do not think there is anything he could have said or did say that will convince me that it is right that a secondary school in Greenwich should get so much more—£1,700 more—on average than secondary schools in my constituency.

Nick Gibb: I failed to mention that, in addition to the funding formula, there is a transition—a minimum floor standard whereby we protect schools that would have received less under the formula. That will be another reason for the discrepancy between Greenwich and my hon. Friend’s constituency.

Gordon Henderson: I appreciate that, and I hope that my schools will feel the benefit. I would be very surprised if they are as grateful as some might expect them to be. I reiterate that education is the most important gift that we can give people. Sadly, historically, too many people living in my constituency—I am talking about people in their 40s, 50s and 60s—are still unable to read the language of their nation. I think it is shameful that we are not able to find a way through our education system to enable those people to write and read the English language.

7.30 pm

Motion lapsed, and sitting adjourned without Question put (Standing Order No. 10(14)).
Westminster Hall

Wednesday 5 June 2019

[Mr Clive Betts in the Chair]

Industrial Strategy: North-East of England

9.30 am

Mary Glindon (North Tyneside) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered industrial strategy in the North East of England.

It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Betts. I am delighted to have been granted this debate on such a crucial subject for our region. There are two local enterprise partnerships in the north-east, so we have two local industrial strategies: one for seven north-east local authorities, and one for the Tees valley.

My area is covered by the North East LEP, which leads on the creation of the local industrial strategy, as its footprint includes two combined authorities: the newly created North of Tyne combined authority and the North East combined authority. As the North of Tyne combined authority has a devolution deal that specifically refers to the LIS, the picture is a little more complicated than elsewhere, as the Minister will appreciate. However, both combined authorities are working together, and with businesses and partners and through the LEP board, to make sure the local industrial strategy makes sense for residents and businesses in the north-east.

I will not talk about the north-east’s fantastic industrial and inventive past, because we see that backward look too often in the region, and although it is important to recognise that we have been passionate, ambitious and innovative for hundreds of years, looking back does a disservice to the brilliant people and businesses that we have today. It does not highlight the fact that the north-east has proportionally more businesses in manufacturing—10.5% against 7.7% nationally—or the fact that in 2018, the growth in the number of businesses massively outstripped what was happening nationally; we had 14.2% growth, versus a national fall of 0.5%, and we have seen a growth in productivity since 2014. Those are positive things, but that is not to detract from the less positive things happening in the region that I think my colleagues will talk about.

Looking back would not highlight the fact that the north-east is a brilliant place to live; I am sure all of us in this room agree on that. It is way more affordable than significant parts of the country. As of March, our average house price—for a very nice house—was £123,000, whereas the national average was £227,000, so I urge people to look at relocating to our area.

Mrs Sharon Hodgson (Washington and Sunderland West) (Lab): Not too many.

Mary Glindon: Perhaps not too many, but all are welcome.

I want to talk about what is strategically important to the north-east today, and what will make a difference to our future. For the north-east, the industrial strategy and the local industrial strategy will be about our ambition, the sectors in which we are strong, and the infrastructure that will lead to growth, and they have to be about turning strategy into action. The LIS is seen as building on the north-east strategic plan, which was agreed with businesses and communities of all sizes and shapes. It has an ambition for more and better jobs—100,000 jobs by 2024, with at least 70% being what are termed better jobs in managerial, professional and technical roles. We have already seen more than 64,000 new jobs created, of which 77% are classed as better jobs, but we need more investment and support from the Government, so that more can be achieved, and we need the right infrastructure put in place.

Yesterday, some of us went to the drop-in held by Highways England. I was pleased to go and congratulate it on the fantastic new Silverlink interchange on the A19, which has massively improved access to the Tyne tunnels. It was done on time, through collaboration between the council, businesses, and Highways England—a great feat for the region.

Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab): I also visited the Highways England drop-in yesterday; my hon. Friend and I were there at the same time. I was told that the project to widen the A19 between Wynyard and Norton will go ahead in May. Will she join me in welcoming that, and an end to the terrible noise that the people of Billingham suffered as a result of the project?

Mary Glindon: That is fantastic news. I hope that the project is done in the same timely way as Silverlink was, and with minimum disruption.

I hope the Minister is aware that a team from the north-east has been talking to the Government about how to make real the industrial strategy’s grand challenge on ageing, by working with local businesses of all sizes and with our universities. There is an opportunity to meet that challenge in our region. There is definitely a commercial opportunity and benefits for society in working with a population that is living longer. There are benefits for expertise, too. In my constituency, Procter & Gamble’s research and development team is focusing on what its older customers will need to live happy and independent lives. We know about a lot of projects that would influence that.

Across our region, there is groundbreaking work in health and life sciences. I am sure colleagues here will expand on that. The north-east has real strengths in the offshore renewables sector, and our region is ready to take advantage right away of any changes in that environment. Shepherd Offshore, Smulders, WD Close and SMD are all top-class, world-renowned companies in my constituency, making a difference across the sector, but they could do even more with the right investments; I will continue to go on about that in Parliament.

One of the main things that hinders the development of those industries to some degree—this is important to South Tyneside, Gateshead and Newcastle—is the need to find a way to secure a significant investment to re-route the National Grid power lines that cross over the Tyne. That would make such a difference in how the Tyne is viewed by companies from around the world. I have been pursuing the issue for a while locally, with National Grid and with another Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Minister, and I am pleased that all four local authorities, the port of Tyne and the North East LEP are working together to look at how
the power lines can be diverted to secure further contracts and local jobs for companies up and down the Tyne. I know it is a vast sum of money—around £20 million—but where there is a will, there is a way, and that is what we are working on.

Catherine McKinnell (Newcastle upon Tyne North) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on making a powerful, important and positive speech about our region and its opportunities. She makes the case for the power of public investment and private sector partnership. Does she agree that it is not only large business that should invest in our region? So should small and medium-sized businesses, which are the lifeblood of our economy. For example, Sage, which is headquartered in my constituency, is working really hard to develop a strategy for a public-private partnership, so that through our public sector organisations, there is more support for growth, investment, productivity and exporting. However, it needs a clear industrial strategy to back that up.

Mary Glindon: That was an excellent intervention, which the Minister must have heard. I can only agree wholeheartedly with everything my hon. Friend said.

On digital and data, the north-east’s history of engineering excellence continues in the digital age. North Tyneside was recently judged to be a hotspot for digital growth. In my constituency, and that of my right hon. Friend the Member for Tynemouth (Sir Alan Campbell), our residents work in world-class digital businesses, such as Accenture and DXC Technology. There is also groundbreaking public service digital work in the Department for Work and Pensions and Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs, and work in local companies such as Perfect Image and Infotel UK.

The most important strength in our region is our people. We have thousands of skilled, passionate and hard-working people who drive our economy, creating and leading businesses, large and small, and working together to serve the region. Although the devolution of the adult education budget to the North of Tyne combined authority is a start, and the national careers strategy gives some important pointers, we need to ensure that we leverage the capabilities of local people.

The industrial strategy and local industrial strategy needs must be backed up with deeds. We need sector deals, which make a real difference, and clear support and investment in skills, with joined-up thinking across Government. I ask the Minister to commit to working closely with colleagues in the Department for Transport to ensure that the east coast main line upgrade is prioritised, and that our north-east transforming cities bid gets solid backing.

In both cases, there is a compelling economic case for investment. Colleagues right up the east coast of England and Scotland know that the east coast main line is as critical as investment in HS2. On the transforming cities bid, we are all working together to continue to secure investment to upgrade the metro, to reopen the Northumberland-Newcastle line to passengers, and to ensure that people and businesses can make the right connections in Sunderland, South Tyneside and Durham.

As the north-east is the only region that exports more than it imports, we will be hit hardest by Brexit. I had not mentioned Brexit up until now, but it had to come in somewhere. For 2014 to 2020, our region received £437 million from the European structural investment funds, which will be replaced by the shared prosperity fund post Brexit. The consultation was expected last year, but we know that the Brexit timetable has changed.

The consultation has been postponed, with as yet no further date announced. Worryingly, it has been said in response to recent parliamentary questions that the final decision on the fund’s design will be taken during the spending review. However, the spending review report will be published only with the Budget in the autumn. I hope that the Minister can tell us a bit more, and assure us that the consultation will begin soon. We do not want any gaps in replacing the loss of European funding.

I will be quiet now, because colleagues wish to talk about the industrial challenges in their constituencies. Those challenges are many, and influence the current and future prosperity of our region. I hope that the Minister has listened to what I have said, and will listen carefully to everything that my colleagues ask of him, and that he will give us clarity and reassurance that the Government are prepared to commit adequate support and resources to our great region, so that it can flourish for everyone in the north-east.

9.44 am

Mrs Sharon Hodgson (Washington and Sunderland West) (Lab): It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Betts. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for North Tyneside (Mary Glindon) for securing this important debate and for her excellent speech. She has laid out why a proper industrial strategy is so important, especially for us in the north-east.

The north-east strategic economic plan has been active for five years. In that time, the region has seen some great change and investment, despite the uncertain times in which we find ourselves. I am proud to be the Member of Parliament for Washington and Sunderland West, which is home—as all Members know, because I bang on about it enough—to Nissan’s UK car plant. There has also been exciting development around the International Advanced Manufacturing Park, known as IAMP, which I am sure Members will become equally sick of hearing me talk about.

Meanwhile, a bid to unlock a potential £33 million in funding is under way with the Centre of Excellence for Sustainable Advanced Manufacturing. That hub will provide advanced manufacturing solutions to many businesses across the market in the region, such as Driving the Electric Revolution, which is based in Sunderland. I am certain that that will attract innovation and investment across the region, to benefit both the local and national economy. Those developments have the potential to transform the north-east.

The north-east strategic economic plan has been successful to a certain extent. It has helped towards the creation of 100,000 more jobs by 2024, as we heard, and the economic gap between the north-east and the rest of the country has narrowed. Some 71,600 jobs have been created so far, of which 70% can be described as “better jobs”. That is an excellent feat for the region and its long-term planning. However, we can be certain that the gap still exists between the north-east and the rest of the UK.
If performance, enabled by investment and infrastructure, had matched that of the rest of England except for London, we would have 93,000 more jobs in the north-east and 25,000 more businesses. The north-east still lags behind in the majority of areas of economic performance, despite, as we heard, securing more foreign investment than any other region. That suggests that the Government’s economic plan is failing us. It has held back the economies and communities of Washington and Sunderland, and those of many other ex-coalfields and post-industrial northern towns.

Alex Cunningham: Does my hon. Friend agree that we have two economies in the north-east: an economy with well-paid jobs, which allows people to go on foreign holidays and enjoy their lives, and poverty that afflicts tens of thousands of people in our area? We have done extremely well as a region, if we just had more investment, we could take so many more people out of poverty.

Mrs Hodgson: Inequality and the wealth gap still exist, probably in all regions—we see it here in London too. Prosperity has never reached some parts of our region, which has led to disenfranchisement in some of our communities. We are now feeling the brunt of that in how they are voting.

Growth is good, but it is important to know where that growth comes from. The quality of communities and how they are sustained by the economy is an important part of keeping the fabric of society vibrant. The role of the Government in the economy must be more than simply growth and redistribution; they should aim to ensure that the country’s growth is responsible and has a social value, so that every one lives that better life. That is something that the Labour party is committed to, with the introduction of a Minister for manufacturing.

Julian Sturdy (York Outer) (Con): The hon. Lady makes some really important points, especially on the wealth gap, which I, as a Yorkshire MP, would say is between the north—rather than the north-east—and the south. Skills and education play a key role in improving the lives and opportunities of everyone. Does she welcome the technical education offer, and the announcement of 12 new technical institutions? Two are in the north-east and Yorkshire: one, York College, is in my constituency and the other is New College Durham. Surely we have to grasp that opportunity to ensure that we improve skills and technical education in our region—I say “our region”, as a Yorkshire MP—as the north moves forward.

Mrs Hodgson: I am happy to say that I agree with the hon. Gentleman. Skills are so important. We hear from employers all the time that they often cannot find the necessary skills in the local workforce, which is heartbreaking when many young people are desperate to acquire those skills. As my hon. Friend the Member for Stockton North (Alex Cunningham) mentioned, we need to ensure that prosperity is shared among everyone.

The rise in the number of apprentices is also welcome, and the technical colleges that the hon. Member for York Outer (Julian Sturdy) mentioned play a huge and important part in that.

The Government often point to low unemployment figures as proof that their approach is working, yet in-work poverty is on the rise. It is at its highest for 20 years, with 4 million people living in poverty despite being in work—it is not just me saying that; the figure comes from Joseph Rowntree Foundation research. One in four workers in the north of England is paid less than the real living wage, after a decade of stagnant wages and the rise of zero-hours contracts. That leads to the two-tier workforce that my hon. Friend the Member for Stockton North mentioned.

Although we are on our way to closing the gap and making businesses in the north-east a more valuable prospect, we are still recovering from the catastrophes that the region has faced in the last 50 years. Those catastrophes have made our communities resilient, but to ensure that we endure, one thing must be at the heart of any strategy: the environment. We must invest sustainably in our economy to ensure that future growth does not come at the expense of our environment. It is essential to confront the climate crisis in every Government strategy, especially an industrial strategy. I am proud that the Labour party has committed to do that, having already forced the Government to declare a climate emergency in May.

Nissan’s investment in battery technology and electric vehicles has put Sunderland at the forefront of the European market. It is the only plant in the UK that makes a purely battery electric vehicle, the LEAF. Nissan’s expansion on the back of the worldwide move to electrification offers the UK the chance to be a leader among European manufacturers, and our local communities will benefit most.

Sustainability should be at the centre of all sides of development. For example, with the expansion of IAMP, which I mentioned, I would like the local transport network to be developed to ensure that in years to come, the staff who work there will have an alternative to private motorised transport when going to work. An excellent way to do that—another opportunity that I never cease to mention—would be to expand the Tyne and Wear metro to Washington and IAMP.

Economic development is another concern in these turbulent times. The ongoing uncertainty of the Brexit process—I have mentioned it as well—may damage investment and businesses in the north-east, as 55% of Nissan’s exports go to the EU. We need a solid and sensible deal for exiting the EU to give businesses certainty. Parliament has made it clear that it rejects the possibility of a no-deal Brexit, yet the idea of reintroducing a no-deal option has been used numerous times by candidates in the Conservative party’s ongoing leadership campaign—I will name no names; I do not want to give anybody more publicity, not that anybody would take any notice of me—in a reckless attempt to bolster themselves. That is worryingly irresponsible and gives no assurance to UK manufacturers, some of whom described the idea of leaving the EU without a deal as “economic lunacy” this week.

The potential for a bright future in the north-east is high. Our region is growing well, and as my hon. Friend the Member for North Tyneside said, it is a great place to live, work and have leisure time, but there are more steps to take to ensure that its development can be sustained and work for everyone, which I hope the Minister will consider.

9.54 am

Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Betts. I, too, congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for North Tyneside (Mary Glindon) on securing this important debate. Unlike her, I will refer to the past.
The area that I represent has a rich history of industrial innovation, from the Stockton to Darlington railway, which was the first in the world and will celebrate its 200-year anniversary in a few years’ time, and which laid the foundations of the Tees Valley’s rapid growth, to our world-leading chemical and pharmaceutical industry, John Walker’s invention of the friction match, and Sheraton furniture, which some of us sit on in this place. We have always been an area that leads the way, although our business and industry have changed substantially over the years and we still lament the loss of Tees shipbuilding and the thousands of well-paid jobs it once provided.

Even if we do not always receive the funding and investment we need from national Governments, the Tees Valley has demonstrated again and again that it can change and attract investment, although more could be done to help it to reach its full potential. That said, we are the third best place in the UK for business expansion and the fourth for business innovation, and we are part of the only continuous net-exporting region in the UK—north-east England.

Our Tees Valley combined authority was one of the first, and it has the powers to make the decisions that affect our area in our area. It has a plan for boosting economic growth and creating thousands of jobs. We also have a thriving and innovative industrial sector that we should celebrate and support.

We have much to be proud of, but, sadly, the decline of some industries and the failure of the Government to act mean that unemployment in our area continues to increase—it has gone up month by month in my constituency. The plight of British Steel is a case in point. I was saddened and disappointed to learn that the high cost of energy is a major factor in the steel crisis and for many other industries in our area. That is why it is vital that our local industrial strategy really counts in its support for our existing industries, and that we lose a large part of a foundation industry that is crucial to the UK’s manufacturing economy. Perhaps the Minister can update us on where the official receiver has sold the business, our elected Tees Valley Mayor has no power to intervene to protect the hundreds of jobs in steel directly and in the supply chain. I hope that the official receiver can sell the business as an integrated going concern; failure to do so will have huge ramifications for our area and others across the country in terms of jobs, and will mean that we lose a large part of a foundation industry that is crucial to the UK’s manufacturing economy.

The high cost of energy is a major factor in the steel crisis and for many other industries in our area. That is one reason I have been focusing on the needs of energy intensive industries not just on Teesside but across the country, from chemicals to cement production and from steel to ceramics. They also include the companies developing wind turbines and related products, which have exploited the skills of our talented engineers to produce the goods for offshore and onshore wind farms. All those industries exist in the face of the highest energy costs in Europe, but there is no plan from the Government, or anyone else, to address that or the high carbon taxes.

Our region has a huge advantage when it comes to expanding low-carbon generation through hydrogen production, in which Teesside is the bigger producer in the country; the development of energy storage; the opportunity to develop smart grids to better support our industry and communities; and, of course, carbon capture, use and storage. I set up and chair the all-party parliamentary group on carbon capture and storage. And I was pleased to lead the demands that Teesside should be the first place to utilise its skills and knowledge in that area. CCUS has the potential to create thousands of jobs and protect thousands more. It is also important in meeting the grand clean growth challenge that the Government face and, crucially, in delivering a long-term sustainable future for the other industries based in our region.

We have heard some kindly noises from Ministers but, unfortunately, the Government have been slow to support CCUS. They talk the good talk—we have had statements, ministerial visits and news releases by the dozen—but we await the concrete commitment that will make the Teesside project roll. That is why it is vital that our local industrial strategy really counts in its support not just for CCUS but for our existing industries, and the new ones, that are critical to our future. We need a strategy that provides certainty and direction for local industries, a sound base to attract funding, and support to help the industries to grow.

A local industrial strategy would benefit our chemical and steel industries, which have been hit by Brexit, particularly the prospect of a no-deal Brexit. The chemical industry needs the EU registration, evaluation, authorisation and restriction of chemicals—REACH—regulations, which govern the manufacture of chemicals, to apply in the UK after Brexit, but despite a considerable amount of work by Ministers and officials, the outcome remains far from perfect and we all know how nervous the industry remains. If there is no deal, what happens to the regulations such as those for chemicals? Will we be able to sell the chemicals and every other piece of manufactured kit that relies on common standards with the EU?

I mentioned earlier the collapse of British Steel, which leaves 700 direct jobs under threat on Teesside, not to mention the impact the closure would have on the local supply chain. British Steel made it clear that the likelihood of a no-deal Brexit was a major factor in its collapse. Put simply, a no-deal Brexit means no steel industry, and that would have huge negative implications on Teesside and beyond.

Surely we cannot have another repeat of the SSI fiasco, which saw an end to steel production from what was probably the country’s most efficient blast furnace in Redcar. Let us not forget what the Government’s failure to act has meant for people: thousands thrown out of work, many of whom are still seeking work today. Since 2015, the SSI site has seen little progress or interest from the Government.

We know that trying to put land parcels together to redevelop the area is complicated, but it is now years since the closure. Sadly, despite my hon. Friend the Member for Redcar (Anna Turley) leading Teeside’s charge for investment and raising the issue of the site at every possible opportunity, we have been told the site will get £14 million—nowhere near the £200 million needed to bring the site back into proper use. What we have instead is a plethora of news releases from the Tees Valley Mayor. If we had a million pounds for every news release that has made promises and delivered nothing, we would have the £200 million that is so desperately needed on Teesside.
That said, I am pleased that the Tees Valley combined authority is currently working on a draft industrial strategy that will sit alongside its strategic economic plan. It identifies our local strengths, as well as our weaknesses, and will set a strategic direction for our industries, but our local efforts need to be backed up by the national Government—a Government that have, so far, fallen short in safeguarding our industries.

I am certain that everybody here wants to see our region prosper and thrive. I am sure we all want to reverse the increase in unemployment in our region, but it needs to be backed by more than words and news releases from the Government. I urge the Minister to stand back, look at Teesside carefully and make the right decisions as we go forward.

10.2 am

Phil Wilson (Sedgefield) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Betts. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for North Tyneside (Mary Glindon) for introducing this debate.

Sedgefield is home to the largest business park in the north-east. Between 10,000 and 12,000 people work there, in about 500 companies, from small sole traders up to massive manufacturers, such as Gestamp, Husqvarna, 3M and, obviously, Hitachi, which is now producing the rolling stock for the east coast main line. Trains for Darlington, Durham, Newcastle and Edinburgh will enter service in August this year. Everybody is looking forward to that—we have been waiting about 40 years for it.

Another manufacturer, Roman, produces showers and bathroom furniture and is now the biggest supplier in Europe. We have a very good story to tell. We are home to a university technical college, which opened two or three years ago. It has been graded good by Ofsted and is going from strength to strength. It has a great future. It is sponsored by Gestamp and Hitachi, who want to see a throughput of apprentices, and it is bringing young people into engineering and electronics and all the manufacturing industries that we want to see maintained in Sedgefield and the north-east.

I want to talk a little about the past, as my hon. Friend the Member for Stockton North (Alex Cunningham) did. We have a sound tradition of manufacturing and industry in Sedgefield. About 500 yards from Hitachi’s base is Heighington crossing, where George Stephenson assembled Locomotion No. 1 so that it could enter service in August this year. The platform has a nice plaque about that. Next to it was the Locomotion No. 1 public house, which is now closed, but was the original ticket office and waiting room—the first ticket office and waiting room. It is there for anybody to go and see. The original platform is there as well—the oldest in the world. We can trace our manufacturing and industrial heritage back at least 200 years.

Alex Cunningham: I am surprised that my hon. Friend would claim that the first ticket office is in his constituency, because there is a plaque on a wall in my constituency that declares the first ticket office in the world to be there. Perhaps we need to meet outside of this room to consider the matter further.

Phil Wilson: We do. All I can say is that that is where the train was assembled, where the ticket office is and where the train set off from.

Mr Clive Betts (in the Chair): Order. I hope you will not be asking the Chair to rule on that.

Phil Wilson: No, no, but I know that Stockton had the first passenger railway in the world. We have a lot to be proud of in our area.

NETPark, a science park just outside Sedgefield village is leading the way in all kinds of technologies, including light-based technology. It produces masks that people with diabetes wear when they are asleep, which helps. It is also a catapult centre for the space industry. It is the home of technology for the future. The park overlooks the site of the old Fishburn coke works and pit, where my dad worked all those years ago. If he could only see the technologies that are now on the doorstep of where he was brought up. I am really proud of it all.

There are 9,000 manufacturing jobs in Sedgefield, which is second only to those in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson), where there are 17,000 jobs and tens of thousands in the supply chain. We have a supply chain of about 16,000. Manufacturing is a key industry for the north-east of England. Make UK, the manufacturers’ organisation, is now saying that it is very worried about a no-deal scenario, as it is “economic lunacy”. On this side of the House, we can all agree. Make UK’s key findings are that domestic and export orders are continuing to weaken, the gap between output and orders has increased, export orders remain at their weakest since the referendum, there is growing evidence of European companies abandoning UK supply chains, investment intentions are paralysed, and the manufacturing forecast for growth is just 0.2% in 2018 and 0.8% in 2020. These are dire figures. We need to think about those indicators as we further consider in this House what to do about Brexit.

I have deep concerns about Brexit. The north-east is the only region that exports more than it imports, and more than 60% of our exports go to European markets. Being part of the EU, the single market and the customs union is vital to the north-east of England. If there is a no-deal Brexit, it is estimated that GDP will fall by 16%, which could mean the loss of something like 200,000 jobs. Those are dire figures, and we should be broadcasting them all the time.

Between 2014 and 2020, the European structural investment fund invested £437 million in the north-east economy. The aim of EU structural funds is to rebalance our economy through regional investment allocated according to need. Will the Minister tell us where that money will come from when it stops coming from the EU? The Government’s stronger towns fund, launched in March this year, consists of a £1 billion fund allocated to English regions and £600 million available under competitive bidding after Brexit. That is less than 10% of what UK regions would receive if the UK remained in the EU: the north-east alone was projected to receive £1 billion over seven years. The shared prosperity fund, which was designed to reduce inequalities between communities, has released no details on the level of funding, the funding model, the length of funding periods or the fund’s administration.

Another issue that I want to raise with the Minister, which he might not be responsible for, is the high street fund, which was announced by the Chancellor of the
Exchequer a few months ago. We all agree that we need to see improvements to our high streets. Newton Aycliffe in my constituency has a high street that is owned by Freshwater. The environmental area has been vastly improved—something for which the town has won awards—but there is still the problem of empty units and shops closing, which affects not just Newton Aycliffe, but our high streets up and down the country. If the likes of Darlington and Durham are losing their branches of Marks & Spencer, I really worry about the future of high streets in new towns such as Newton Aycliffe. What can we do to remedy that?

I want to make one or two other points. The north-east is one region, but we do not act like one region. If we did, we would become a true powerhouse. The regional development agency, which was abolished by this Government back in 2010-11, was a key asset to the north-east of England. I think it is fair to say that investment was from the public sector to the private sector in the north; in the south-east, it might be from the private sector to the private sector. The regional development agency was therefore a key contributor to bringing investment to the north-east.

Mrs Hodgson: My hon. Friend is making a very good point, which I want to reinforce by putting it on record that, from my recollection, the regional development agency in the north-east was the only one that really worked as it should have. For every £1 that the Government invested in the north-east through the One North East RDA, the return was £7. I might have it wrong, but that is the figure from memory. Does he agree that we should have certainly been able to keep One North East, because it worked?

Phil Wilson: That is right, and to abolish One North East was an act of economic vandalism. It was a kind of ideology gone mad—“If it is public sector, we should abolish it.” We now see the impact of its loss, to the detriment of the north-east of England. We have got rid of the regional development agency, and we do not act as one region. We have two Mayors and three combined authorities competing with each other, whereas we need to be one region—the north-east of England—talking as one for the benefit of the whole region.

I will finish by discussing the issue of Brexit. I remember when the news came out a few months ago about the manufacturing loss of Nissan models such as the X-Trail. I remember people from the region saying on the television, “Well, if Nissan goes, we’ll be okay. We survived the closure of the pits. We survived the closure of the shipyards.” Well, we might have done—we might be starting to come out of that period—but it has taken years. How did we survive that? Why have we got a big upturn in car manufacturing? How have we as a region been able to attract foreign direct investment in the way that we have, with Nissan and Hitachi in my constituency, and with other manufacturers around the country? How were we able to survive the closures of the pits and the shipyards?

The reason is that we were in the single market and the customs union, and we had access to the biggest trading bloc—the biggest economic bloc—in the world. My view is that it is absolutely wrong for the region, and for this country, to close the door on that.
the region, and we will continue to argue for that. We certainly must address that infrastructure issue, and the others that hon. Members have mentioned, if we are to have a positive future industrial strategy.

The issue of European funding was mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Sedgefield (Phil Wilson) and others. As we have heard, the north-east is the only region that is a net exporter. We have heard that it will be hit hard by Brexit, especially a no-deal Brexit—there would be an estimated 16% fall in GDP growth. It is important to ensure that we have the right conditions and the right deal for the north-east if we are to avoid real problems.

Hon. Members have already referred to the shared prosperity fund. The north-east currently benefits from EU structural investment funds that are designed to address regional imbalances, receiving £437 million between 2014 and 2020. It is vital that businesses know the size and the terms of the shared prosperity fund as soon as possible. It has been kicked down the road in the years since the initial announcement was made. It is absolutely vital that our businesses know what is coming so they can plan accordingly.

Let me touch on education and skills. As we have heard, the north-east has some excellent universities and further education colleges, including Gateshead College—the outstanding and high-performing college—yet employers still struggle to find workers with the right skills, so we need action to close the skills gap and identify our future skills needs. We must address that in the strategy, and local input—the local power to have a say on skills—is really important when we do that.

The retail sector provides nearly a quarter of the jobs in my constituency. We know that the retail sector, high streets and shopping malls are going through a tough time, so we need a retail strategy. That is one of the weaknesses of the Government’s national industrial strategy. We need a greater emphasis on retail, because it is such a significant part of our economy. We need a proper strategy to deal with the problems on the high street. The Government need look no further than the outstanding and high-performing college—yet employers still struggle to find workers with the right skills, so we need action to close the skills gap and identify our future skills needs. We must address that in the strategy, and local input—the local power to have a say on skills—is really important when we do that.

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Alex Cunningham: I congratulate the Select Committee on its excellent report. It visited my constituency to see Stockton high street. Will my hon. Friend join me in congratulating the local authority, which is bringing international athletics to the area? International athletes will be running down the widest high street in England, bringing people into our town centre and boosting our local businesses.

Liz Twist: I am very happy to congratulate Stockton on those innovations—while of course mentioning that Gateshead, which is not to be outdone, has a strong record in international athletics.

The north-east has a rich and proud industrial history, but we need support. Positive steps must be taken to put in place infrastructure. We must recognise and address the particular issues that we face in the north-east.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): It is a real pleasure and honour to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Betts. I congratulate my constituency neighbour, my hon. Friend the Member for North Tyneside (Mary Glindon), on securing this important and timely debate. The industrial strategy in the north-east does not receive the attention it deserves, so I am grateful to her for bringing this debate to Westminster Hall and for making such a passionate and comprehensive opening speech. She combined in-depth knowledge of her constituency and region with real lived experience. In that, she was joined by my hon. Friend the Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson), for Sedgefield (Phil Wilson), for Blaydon (Liz Twist) and for Stockton North (Alex Cunningham), who all grew up and have lived in the region, and spoke with such knowledge. It is a pity that that knowledge is not reflected by the presence of Government Members from north-east constituencies, but Labour Members have done well and have spoken with in-depth knowledge about our region.

Like other hon. Members, I will talk a little about the past. We are very proud of our industrial heritage. I grew up in Newcastle in the shadow of industrial greats such as Armstrong, Stephenson and Parsons—that, by the way, is Rachel Parsons, the world’s first female naval engineer, who inspired me to become an engineer. I always like to remind colleagues from across the UK that the north-east literally drove the first industrial revolution. There might be some debate about where the first ticket office was—you were wise not to rule on that, Mr Betts, but perhaps we can have a parliamentary inquiry on that important subject—but there is no debate about who invented the railways. George Stephenson built the locomotive in my constituency, and our region mined and built many of the industrial riches that flowed from the first industrial revolution.

Today, as we have heard, manufacturing makes up approximately 15% of the north-east economy, and we have more than 63,000 specialist workers in our successful advanced manufacturing sector. We have a 126,000-strong workforce in wider manufacturing, and an average of 51,000 science, technology, engineering and mathematics students come through our universities every year. We are in the top five UK regions for advanced manufacturing. We have world-class universities and growing strengths in science, digital, energy, healthcare and business.

Years of deindustrialisation, and chronic underinvestment in infrastructure and education, have left the north-east with significant economic challenges. No one who lived in the region in the 1980s can forget what forced deindustrialisation did to our region, the economic livelihoods that were lost and the talent and potential that was lost with them. The financialisation of our economy that followed centred on London and the economy that followed. We are now in a situation where the north-east were lost. As leading economist Mariana Mazzucato has argued, the “two faces” of financialisation are at the heart of capitalism’s fundamental failure. The first is that the financial sector has stopped resourcing the real economy. Instead of investing in companies that produce stuff, finance is financing finance. The second is how financialisation changes the motors behind economic activity, giving investors with short-term interests more control over firms. That disproportionately affects
Chi Onwurah

the north-east—a region that still takes pride in making and building things. Its legacy is low productivity and low pay.

As we heard from many of my hon. Friends, Brexit adds more uncertainty. The north-east expects more than it imports, as my hon. Friend the Member for Sedgefield, for Washington and Sunderland West, and for Blaydon highlighted, and more than half of that goes to the European Union. No matter what deal there is, there will be negative economic consequences for our region. A no-deal Brexit would be absolutely catastrophic. I ask the Minister to rule that out personally.

As my hon. Friend emphasised, the north-east received almost £0.5 billion in European structural investment funding in the period 2014 to 2020. As my hon. Friend the Member for Sedgefield said, projections for the next seven years suggest that we would have received up to £1 billion in EU funding, but the Government’s paltry stronger towns fund repackages existing money to the tune of £1 billion for all UK regions. As my hon. Friend said, we have no details about the supposed shared prosperity fund. Labour has committed to matching European Union regional development funding for at least the next decade, so will the Minister take this opportunity to commit to tackling regional inequality by guaranteeing the continuation of the current and projected future levels of regional funding?

At the heart of tackling the challenges that our great region faces needs to be a strong, positive industrial strategy capable of building and rebuilding the economy to meet the needs of the future. Until very recently, the Government were incapable of saying “industrial” and “strategy” in the same sentence, so their acknowledgment of the need for local industrial strategies is a step forward. Unfortunately, we have no evidence that the Government’s industrial strategy is anywhere near sufficient for the north-east’s needs. Their industrial strategy is sectoral, favours sectors that are already well organised and can push to the front of the queue, and focuses on what I, as an engineer, would call “sexy science”. Last year, Sheffield Hallam University researchers found that the Government’s industrial strategy pledges would impact only 10% of our manufacturing base and only 1% of the whole economy.

The north-east’s five universities make a huge contribution to our economy—they contribute £750 million directly, and £1 billion more through other industries—yet the golden triangle of London-Cambridge-Oxford attracts the lion’s share of research funding—more than £17 billion, compared with only £600 million for the north-east—despite the north-east’s many research-intensive universities, such as Newcastle University. Cambridge, with a population of just over a quarter of a million, has as many private research and development jobs as the whole of the north. Does the Minister agree that innovation should deliver high-skilled jobs across our country, and how will he ensure that local industrial strategies from our local enterprise partnerships and the North of Tyne Mayor have the resources that they need to deliver high-skilled and high-productivity jobs?

Labour’s “innovation nation” mission would raise R&D to 3% of GDP, and would democratise science and technology, so that they benefit the whole country, as well as the whole region. It would also be certain to benefit the north-east’s growing tech industry. We need to maintain our current centres of excellence, but we must ensure that every region can benefit from innovation and growth. That is why we are committed to putting technology and innovation at the heart of the lowest-paid and least productive sectors. My hon. Friends the Members for Blaydon, and for Stockton North, mentioned the importance of retail. We are committed to creating a retail catapult, which will support the 3 million people who work in retail across the UK, making it the UK’s largest private sector employer.

Much of our additional R&D spend would be drawn on by our industrial strategy missions, such as investing in carbon capture and storage, which I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Stockton North also mentioned, as part of our commitment to decarbonise our economy by 2050 and to deliver hundreds of thousands of green jobs in the process. The Government’s refusal to commit to funding a carbon capture and storage facility on Teesside is another example of their unwillingness to invest in the green technologies of the future.

The regional disparity and unique issues that the north-east faces are the reason that we need the £250 billion national investment bank—a network of regional development banks—to which Labour is committed. That would properly put regional needs first and restore regional decision making. Labour’s national education service will address some of the challenges highlighted by my hon. Friends, by delivering education, free at the point of demand, from cradle to grave, and ensuring that we have the skills that our regional businesses need.

As my hon. Friends also highlighted, improving infrastructure is critical to raising productivity. Under the Tories, infrastructure spending in the north-east is five times lower than in London, which is why Labour’s £250 billion national transformation fund would invest in our transport and digital infrastructure. We have already committed to a £1.4 billion investment in north-east transport, which would renew rolling stock on the Metro and build a Crossrail for the north. Would the Minister like to do the same?

Labour would also establish a new materials and metals catapult centre on Teesside—that is supported by UK Steel, the Federation of Small Businesses and the Confederation of British Industry—to help secure the future of UK steel by encouraging innovation in the materials industry. Will the Minister secure the future of UK steel with a commitment to support it?

As we have heard, the north-east is a fantastic region that offers a quality of life that is second to none, with sun, surf, castles, coasts, rolling landscapes, history—including the Romans—excellent local produce and excellent industry. We need a real industrial strategy to support the north-east, realise its potential and deliver an economy that ensures prosperity for everyone across our region. Labour’s industrial strategy is positive, practical and visionary enough to know the future that we want, while focusing on addressing our present challenges in productivity, skills and wages. Will the Minister commit to doing the same?

10.35 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Andrew Stephenson): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Betts. I congratulate the hon. Member for North Tyneside
to two north-east projects to enable them to develop full bids this year: the Centre of Excellence for Sustainable Advanced Manufacturing, led by the University of Sunderland; and the north-east cluster for healthy ageing and independent living, led by Newcastle University. In the neighbouring Tees Valley, strength in places support has been awarded to a project to establish the UK hydrogen corridor, which aims to reduce carbon usage dramatically by producing, using and storing hydrogen energy.

**Alex Cunningham:** Any investment in the north-east is great news, in particular if it encourages innovation, but does the Minister also recognise that we need to support our existing industries? British Steel is a particularly important one at this time. As I asked in my remarks, will he update us on his understanding of the progress being made in that area?

**Andrew Stephenson:** Certainly. I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for raising the issue of British Steel. Since I was appointed, it has probably been the one thing that has taken up more of my time than anything else. The one point of contention in what he said was his suggestion that the Government were standing on the sidelines as British Steel went into liquidation, waiting for the receiver to act.

The hon. Gentleman was in the main Chamber when I answered an urgent question by saying that no stone was being left unturned. At that point, I think that the Department was up to 87 meetings about British Steel. The £120 million bridging loan that we extended to the company earlier in the year showed the Secretary of State’s willingness to think innovatively and to act with regard to British Steel. We considered all sorts of proposals made by the company but, unfortunately, none of them proved compliant with state aid rules—we took legal opinion on that—so the company went into liquidation.

The Government acted immediately by providing the liquidator with an indemnity for the cost of keeping the site running, so that the blast furnaces could be kept running and we would end up with British Steel in the best possible situation to be sold as a going concern. The very next day after the Secretary of State made his statement to the House about the unfortunate news of the liquidation, he and I went up to Scunthorpe to meet trade union representatives and other people on the site to discuss how to work together to ensure that it could be sold as a going concern. I remain hopeful that that will be the case, and I will continue to leave no stone unturned, working with the trade unions, the workers and others on site to ensure that it is sold as a going concern.

**Alex Cunningham:** I might have been a little unkind to the Minister—that is a hell of a lot of meetings—but talking does not get us far when real funding is needed. If this integrated part of the steel industry cannot be sold as a going concern, just as we nationalised the banks, will the Minister consider nationalising part of the steel industry, even on a temporary basis, to ensure that we do not lose this critical foundation industry?

**Andrew Stephenson:** I think that I am correct in saying that the Secretary of State has not ruled that option out. However, the thing to bear in mind about nationalisation is that, even if British Steel were nationalised, the same state aid rules apply: the company has to be

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run on a commercial basis in order to be compliant with those rules. Therefore, nationalisation is not a simple solution; it might be the solution, but it is not an easy option.

Lots of steel companies in the UK and across Europe are doing great work, and I hope that we can find an experienced company in the sector that wants to invest in British Steel. If we look at the steel sector pipeline—orders and infrastructure projects across the UK, such as Hinkley Point, High Speed 2 and various other big projects—there is sizeable domestic demand for products made by British Steel. I think that the company has a strong future. I am therefore very hopeful that over the coming weeks and months we will find a good buyer who will want to invest in the site and, most importantly, its workers who have such skills and knowledge of the industry, to ensure the future of steelmaking in that part of this country.

Chi Onwurah: I thank the Minister for responding to questions about the key strategic asset of British Steel and of that capability. He cited state aid rules as a crucial concern in providing the right level of financial and other support. Does he agree that different countries interpret state aid rules in different ways? Other countries within the European Union have been, shall we say, far more innovative, creative and supportive with their strategic industrial capacities, despite the same state aid rules environment. Will he commit to publishing parts of the legal advice on the possible infringement of state aid, so that we can see whether there is a way to provide British Steel with the support it requires within the European Union and, indeed, World Trade Organisation state aid rules, which other countries do manage to achieve?

Andrew Stephenson: The shadow Minister makes a valid point about the interpretation of state aid rules. The challenge of the rules in relation to the steel sector is that they are particularly rigid. A lot of the global overcapacity was created by illegal subsidies around the world for domestic steel producers.

We received legal advice from within the Department and, on the Secretary of State's instruction, we sought a second opinion, because we wanted to ensure that there was definitely nothing more that we could do. The accounting officer's advice has, I believe, been laid in the Libraries of both Houses, so it is available to all hon. Members who wish to see it. I hope that it sets out how the Government looked at the issue in a detailed way.

The reason I mentioned the 87 meetings is that we were meeting morning, evening and night about it, in order to find a way through. The Secretary of State, whom I have the pleasure of working with and serving under, has a real commitment to the north-east. Originally, he is from that part of the world, and he really wants the British Steel site to remain a going concern. Through the number of meetings he has had, the £120 million bridging facility provided to the industry and other things, he clearly demonstrates a commitment to finding a way through, but it has to be legal and compliant with both UK domestic law and EU law. I look forward to continuing to work with him, hon. Members in all parts of the House, trade unions and others to ensure a future for British Steel.

Returning to research and development spending, we have committed record investment in UK infrastructure: £37 billion has been committed through the national productivity investment fund, including £2.5 billion for the transforming cities fund to improve transport, £5.5 billion for the housing infrastructure fund and £740 million for digital infrastructure. That infrastructure investment has been of direct relevance to the north-east of England. In March, the Government announced that £10 million from the first tranche of the transforming cities fund will be allocated to the north-east, and £35.9 million of housing infrastructure funding has been allocated to the region.

Aside from that national work, all places will produce local industrial strategies, setting out how the quest for prosperity will come to life in our cities, towns and rural areas. The first local industrial strategy was published on 16 May in the west midlands. I was delighted to join local councillors and others in Coventry to launch that strategy. The north-east and the Tees Valley areas are both in the second wave of places to produce their own local industrial strategies in collaboration with Government. In the area of the hon. Member for North Tyneside, that work is led by the North East local enterprise partnership, which has a strong history of evidence-based delivery and is well placed to develop a powerful and distinctive local industrial strategy for the region. So far, a number of critical local drivers have been identified to improve productivity in the north-east: from the need to grow small businesses and to improve start-up rates, to improving the skills base of the local workforce.

The north-east boasts a cutting-edge technological and knowledge economy, based on its four leading universities and its fast-growing digital and tech sectors. On the doorstep are tremendous opportunities in east coast offshore energy, as well as deep expertise in advanced manufacturing. I am particularly interested in the contribution that the area could make to the ageing society grand challenge, which was cited by the hon. Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson). The north-east is home to the £40 million National Innovation Centre for Ageing, which reflects Newcastle University's longstanding leadership in that field. There is a powerful story to tell about how the north-east, with its large rural area and expertise of the transition away from heavy industry, is ideally placed to lead the response to this national and global challenge.

The north-east local industrial strategy will be empowered by the recent North of Tyne devolution deal, which covers three north-east authorities: Newcastle, Northumberland and the home authority of the hon. Member for North Tyneside, I congratulate the three councils on their successful pursuit of devolution, and Jamie Driscoll on his recent election as the first North of Tyne Mayor. The Government have a strong track record of working with the elected mayors, including Ben Houchen in Tees Valley. Alongside specific powers such as control over the adult education budget, the deal includes a total investment fund of £600 million over 30 years, to be used by the area to pursue its local growth goals. Local estimates are that the investment will generate £1.1 billion for the local economy and create 10,000 new jobs.

The north-east local industrial strategy will build on a strong track record of investment in the wider North East local enterprise partnership area. Over the three rounds of the local growth fund, £379.6 million will be invested
in the North East LEP area. That includes £1 million for the Ignite centre for engineering and innovation in North Tyneside. I look forward to visiting the north-east and Tees Valley—shortly I will visit the Centre for Process Innovation, which has bases in both areas. That centre has a strong record of collaboration with Government, including a £38 million grant from UK Research and Innovation to establish a national biologics industry innovation centre in Darlington.

Alex Cunningham: I am sure we will welcome the Minister when he comes to the Tees Valley. Will he bring some good news on carbon capture, use and storage?

Andrew Stephenson: I am very keen to see the UK move forward with carbon capture, use and storage. The hon. Gentleman will be aware of the report by the Committee on Climate Change, which suggested that we could move towards a target of net zero in the same cost envelope as our current target. It says that carbon capture and storage has to be part of the mix. That will accelerate what the Government are doing in this area. I will certainly pass on remarks from today’s debate to the Minister for Energy and Climate Change, as I am sure she will want to focus on this area. When I am in the region, I will be keen to see some of the work in the renewables sector, and I will also pay close attention to carbon capture, use and storage now that the hon. Gentleman has raised it.

I will visit the CPI’s Redcar centre to discuss its achievements and ambitions and the development of the industrial strategy. I look forward to attending the northern powerhouse SME roadshow in June, to discuss investment opportunities and links to the industrial strategy across the whole of the north. Through local partnerships with Government and the impact of national investments, we expect the north-east and Tees Valley to play a full part in the industrial strategy agenda.

I was pleased to hear a number of hon. Members support various Highways England projects in the region, including Silverlink and improvements to the A19. I take on board the point made by the hon. Member for North Tyneside about power lines; she has raised that point on numerous occasions and has met my ministerial colleague about this issue, who wrote to Ofgem about it, and we are looking at possible ways forward. I am sure we will continue to push the point, and I assure her that her remarks today have not gone unnoticed.

Members rightly raised the importance of the east coast main line. At the Cabinet meeting in Newcastle in July 2018, a £780 million investment in the east coast main line was announced, which hopefully will mean faster journey times and more frequent services. That builds on the £337 million that was announced to ensure that companies across the board invest in carbon capture, use and storage now that the hon. Gentleman has raised it.

I strongly agree with the comments by the hon. Member for Washington and Sunderland West about the importance of Nissan and its huge strength in battery technology. I agree that the company is incredibly well placed to benefit from schemes such as the Government’s £246 million Faraday battery challenge, which is supporting the development of new battery technology in a market that will be worth £5 billion to the UK by 2025.

As the Minister responsible for the automotive sector, I recognise that the sector will go through more change in the next 10 years than it has in the last 100. We need to work closely with car manufacturers based in the UK to help them with that transition and to ensure that they decide this is the best country in the world in which to invest in new, cleaner modes of transport.

Chi Onwurah: The Minister speaks about the importance of battery technology, and Nissan’s strength in particular, but does he recognise that while the five-year fund supports investment in battery technology, it does not support investment in battery manufacturing? In this country we need a battery manufacturing base, so that batteries are not simply imported. Will he speak to that? I also hope he will not forget to respond to the concerns about a replacement for European regional development and structural investment funds.

Andrew Stephenson: The shadow Minister is correct; that is one of the reasons why we have the industrial strategy challenge fund. I mentioned my being in Coventry to launch the west midlands local industrial strategy, which was the first to be launched. On that day, I was delighted to visit the UK Battery Industrialisation Centre and to announce a further £28 million for that facility, which will be about production. It will take technologies being developed in places such as the Advanced Propulsion Centre and see how to produce batteries here in the UK. Some existing companies that have already done incredible work, such as Nissan, have the potential to bid for some of the Government funds that are already available, as well as future funds. That is fundamental because of the number of petrol engines we produce in the UK: to keep the UK as an automotive hub, we need to ensure that companies across the board invest in battery technology and production in the UK.

Questions have been asked about the £675 million high streets fund, the £1.6 billion stronger towns fund and the UK shared prosperity fund. More details of all those funds will be published in due course. They show the Government’s commitment to addressing the challenges raised by Members today. We need to invest more in renewable technologies, as was raised by several Members. The offshore wind sector deal is a great example of that. The Government’s commitment to the sector is underlined by the £92 billion of public and private investment in renewables since 2010. We have just finished an 18-day coal-free run in our power supply.

Lots has been done, but there is lots more to do, and lots of great ideas have been suggested today. I look forward to working with all Members who spoke in the debate and to visiting their constituencies and some of the projects they talked about.

Mary Glindon: I neglected to congratulate the Minister on his appointment. We are all pleased to hear that he has roots in the north-east and a personal knowledge of it, and we will call on that—he has dropped himself right in it.

I hope that the issues about British steel, which have been stressed over and again, will be carried forward because they are so important. Will the Minister take on board and pass on the message that a no-deal Brexit is no good for the north-east in any shape or form? It would be catastrophic.

Members in the debate have shown the pride of the north-east today. We want an industrial strategy that works for everyone—as the Minister said, to get prosperity
in every region so nobody misses out and everyone can flourish in the north-east through a good industrial strategy. We will push the Minister as we move towards the publication of our industrial strategy. Thanks again to everyone who has participated in this debate and to you, Mr Betts.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved,*

That this House has considered industrial strategy in the North East of England.

10.59 am

**Justin Madders** (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered transport in Cheshire.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Betts. I am glad to see you here, and I thank the other hon. Members present for attending.

The debate is about transport issues in Cheshire, but we could not possibly deal with all the issues in the time available, so I will talk about two issues with a common element that has been causing much anger, frustration and consternation in my constituency and beyond. I refer to the River Mersey and the tolls my constituents face to cross it, be it by the Mersey tunnels or the Mersey Gateway. There is now no way they can cross the river for work, for family reasons or for medical treatment without paying a fee. Of course, there have always been fees for the Mersey tunnels, but not ones that discriminate against people because of where they live.

Let me start with the principle of the tolls. The fact that the Mersey tunnels have always had tolls does not make the tolls’ existence any more defendable. Indeed, it is difficult to understand why they are still in place, given that we have heard repeatedly from Ministers how the removal of tolls can improve an area’s economic performance—an argument that seemingly won in south Wales, where the Severn crossings had their tolls abolished; in Scotland, where the new Forth crossing is not tolled; and in the true blue Tory shires of England, where plans for the A14 upgrade to be tolled around Huntingdon and Cambridge were scrapped.

**Mike Amesbury** (Weaver Vale) (Lab): Would there not be a considerable outcry if just one of the 36 bridges over the River Thames in London were tolled? Is this unfairness not a case of a real north-south divide?

**Justin Madders:** I agree, and London seems to do better than the rest of the country in terms of per-head transport investment, too.

None of the crossings in Northern Ireland is tolled, none in Scotland is tolled and, as we have heard, London is equally blessed. In fact, more than 90% of tidal crossings in this country are toll free. The argument that tolls harm economic growth seems to be accepted everywhere, except on the River Mersey.

As I said, the tolls on the Mersey tunnels have always been with us. They are not popular, but they have always been part of life. However, an unconscionable decision earlier this year by the Liverpool city region metro Mayor has made them far less acceptable. Regular tunnel users can apply for a fast tag, which gives a discount on the normal fees. From 1 April this year, the fee for those who live in the Merseyside area was reduced from £1.20 to £1, but the fee for those outside the Merseyside area was increased by a whopping 50%, from £1.20 to £1.80. That decision was made with little notice, no consultation and complete disregard for the economic impact on those living outside Merseyside.

Although my constituency is in Cheshire, we are very much in the hinterland of Merseyside—the number of Liverpool shirts I saw over the weekend is testament to that. We are less than 10 miles from Liverpool city centre, and our economic, cultural and family connections
mean that people travel there daily. When my constituents ask me whether it is right that they have to pay nearly twice as much as someone who lives just down the road from them to go to work or visit their elderly mother, I tell them, “No, it isn’t.” It is discrimination by postcode, and it is not something I believe anyone who wants fairness in this country can support.

To be fair to the metro Mayor, he would like to be able to get rid of tolls altogether. I am happy to work with him and anyone else who wants to join me on that campaign, but that is a longer-term aim. In the short term, he has defended his decision robustly. He rightly points out that the Liverpool city region has experienced the largest Government funding cuts anywhere in the country, and that the people he represents cannot be expected to shoulder the burden of austerity. His conclusion is that he cannot have non-city region residents’ travel being subsidised. I understand what he says, but he is simply wrong about subsidy.

The Mersey tunnels, for which I understand the tolls are the third highest of their type in the whole country, are operated under the Mersey Tunnels Act 2004, which permits any operating surplus to be used by the transport authority to achieve public transport policies in its local transport plan. In 2017-18, the surplus from operating the tunnels was £16.7 million, so my constituents, far from asking for a subsidy, clearly subsidise the rest of the Merseytravel operation—indeed, all tunnel users do. Given that level of surplus, the decision to increase the costs for my constituents by 50% cannot be said to be critical to Merseytravel’s operations. There is no room for doubt about that. It feels much more like racketeering.

One might argue that the surplus is used to provide good public transport services across Merseyside and beyond, which of course benefits my constituents, albeit to a lesser degree than Merseyside residents. However, a closer look at rail fares suggests that when my constituents use cross-border Merseyrail services, they are again subject to indefensible price differences. For example, a day return from Eastham Rake on the Merseyrail line—the first stop in Merseyside when travelling from Cheshire—to Liverpool is £1.50 cheaper than a day return from Little Sutton. That is 25% extra for just two stops down the line. Although Capenhurst station is not in my constituency, it is used by many of my constituents and it is also just two stops down from Eastham Rake, but a day return to Liverpool from Capenhurst costs more than £3 extra.

It feels like the residents of Cheshire are seen as a soft touch—a cash cow. Sadly, I feel there is a bit of reverse snobbery here, the implication being that people who live in Cheshire are a bit better off, so they can afford to pay more. That just is not the case for the majority of people. My constituency has some pockets of wealth, but it also has some of the most deprived wards in the country. Some of the examples constituents have given me of the hardship they have suffered demonstrate that they are not people with loads of spare cash floating about, waiting to be squeezed until the pips squeak.

Mr George Howarth (Knowsley) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making a powerful case. Although he feels his constituents are discriminated against, does he accept that the same applies to people from Knowsley, parts of Liverpool and St Helens, for whom there is no public transport option that makes sense? They have only one option: the Mersey Gateway. In some cases, it costs them £20 a week extra to travel to and from work in his constituency or that of my hon. Friend the Member for Weaver Vale (Mike Amesbury). Surely that is not acceptable.

Justin Madders: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. I will talk about the Mersey Gateway later, because we have another very difficult situation there.

As my right hon. Friend says, many people have no option but to cross the Mersey to get to work. Many of those people work in public sector organisations such as the police and the NHS, and have not had a real pay rise for almost a decade. They often work shifts. The only way they can get to work is with their own transport, because public transport does not operate on the routes or at the times they need to get to work.

For example, an Ellesmere Port resident works as a physiotherapist specialising in treating head and neck cancer patients from across the north-west at Aintree Hospital. She pays at least £400 more per year than Wirral residents to get to work. What about the band 5 staff nurse who recently began working at the Royal Liverpool Hospital and, due to her shift times, has to drive from Ellesmere Port to Liverpool? She says she finds it financially crippling to pay tunnel tolls and car park fees. She also makes the point that colleagues who live down the road from her on the Wirral and in Liverpool can pay the lower toll, but they have better public transport options anyway.

We know how hard it is for the NHS to recruit and retain staff, particularly nurses, but this policy seems to be forcing them out. One nurse told me that “the individual cost of the Toll fees on my current wage may force me to leave my nursing post at the Royal Liverpool NHS Foundation trust and seek employment elsewhere. I find my situation ironic due the desperate need for nursing staff at the hospital but am being forced out by unfair and discriminatory postcode politics.”

I could not have put it better myself. Then there are the people who have to travel across the Mersey at both crossings to get treatment at more specialist healthcare services, such as Broadgreen and Alder Hey. Why should people with the most serious conditions be treated in that way?

I have been given dozens of examples of people who use the tunnels for work and who are thinking of taking their talents elsewhere. Ultimately, this is an economically damaging policy. There are also those who go to visit their family, including elderly relatives. I have a constituent who travels over the Mersey nearly every day to care for her 80-year-old mum, who has dementia. She saves the council a fortune in social care costs, but her contribution does not appear to carry any weight. There are others, including the British Sign Language interpreter, the paramedics, the teachers and the Leahurst veterinary school students. None of those people have been considered, because there has been no assessment of the impact of the decision.

Those are just some examples of the hardship faced by my constituents and others who have no choice but to cross the Mersey—hardship the metro Mayor actually appears to recognise. Last year, he said:

“The introduction of additional tolls has proven to be a significant imposition to many from lower socio-economic groups, who are already struggling to make ends meet.”

He was talking about the Mersey Gateway tolls, but it could just as easily have been the Mersey tunnels tolls. I agree, and his argument applies to both crossings. I also agree with him when he said:

“The economic wellbeing of our city region is a joint responsibility between the combined authority and Government.”

I ask the Minister to set out what he will do to ensure that my constituents no longer face these rip-off charges.

If the Minister does not think it is the Government’s responsibility to ensure citizens of this country do not face postcode discrimination, he must agree that they do have responsibility for promises made by members of the Government. I refer specifically to the former Chancellor of the Exchequer, George Osborne, who made promises about the Mersey Gateway that have not materialised. In a tweet on 23 April 2015 he said:

“Confirm we’ll extend free bridge tolls to residents of Cheshire W & Chester + Warrington”.

One of my constituents was understandably a little sceptical about that comment, so he emailed the Conservative party candidate for Ellesmere Port and Neston in the 2015 election, who responded in unequivocal terms:

“If we get a majority it’s a firm commitment and applies to all of Cheshire West Council including us. I’ve been involved in making the case to the Chancellor and he’s listened and acted.”

As we know, the Conservatives did win a majority, but the promise was reneged on. As my constituent said, it was a clear and simple promise on which they have totally failed to deliver in any way whatever.

While we are on the subject, I draw the Minister’s attention to a statement by the then Chancellor during the 2015 election regarding Mersey tunnel fees. He said:

“They will definitely be cut. I think we might be able to go further. I’m quite optimistic that we might be able to go further and abolish them altogether”.

Please, Minister, do not say in responding that this is for local operators to determine. When the Chancellor of the day makes clear statements—promises, no less—it is incumbent on the Government to deliver them. The reputation of this place has had a real shaking in recent times, and no wonder when unambiguous, incontestable promises are made just before an election and jettisoned without a second thought. It destroys the very essence of what politics should be about—honesty and integrity—and replaces it with cynicism and callous disrespect for the public.

I turn to our continuing problems with the Mersey Gateway, to which my right hon. Friend the Member for Knowsley (Mr Howarth) referred. According to the local campaign group, hundreds of thousands of fines have been issued, and so far about 7,500 penalties have been appealed to the Traffic Penalty Tribunal, which I understand have all been allowed. If that is correct, it must surely encourage the Minister to make enquiries about what on earth is going on. I urge him to look into how these fines are arising. It is clear there are regular issues with people seeing the signs and paying in time. It is far from clear when people have to pay by and how they should pay. Why does it have to always be online?

Damien Moore (Southport) (Con): Many of my constituents have been affected and are deeply upset, getting continual fines after they thought they had paid when there was a problem with the system. Paying online is immensely difficult for older people who do not have access to online facilities. Why should they have to go to a shop somewhere to pay? It should not be up to them to find that; it should be up to toll operators, if a toll is to be charged, to make it as easy as possible for people to cross.

Justin Madders: The hon. Gentleman makes a valid point. The system seems to have been set up to make it as difficult as possible to pay the tolls, which is probably why there are so many difficulties and so many fines. It is the major route to John Lennon airport, and how realistic is it to expect people going on their holidays to pay a toll online by the following day? It is not living in the real world.

There are real concerns about the tactics used by the debt recovery firm once a fine is issued, and about the way costs can escalate to nearly £400 in no time at all. A minimum bailiff charge of £380 for a £2 crossing seems totally disproportionate; it is yet more racketeering. I have heard too many stories of bailiffs turning up unannounced and clamping vehicles before they have spoken to anyone to be confident that they are operating reasonably.

I ask the Minister again to consider that those in the public sector in particular travelling in both directions over the bridge face four-figure increases in their costs just to get to work. I have heard many difficult stories about how people have been affected, including one from a young mum whose husband had a stay in Broadgreen Hospital. It was costing her £15 extra a day just to visit him. She had more than enough to worry about at that time.

Faisal Rashid (Warrington South) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making an excellent case. In view of those issues and the Conservative party’s promise in 2015, does he agree that now is the time to scrap the Mersey Gateway toll? At the end of the day, the people of the whole region are affected immensely.

Justin Madders: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point. The injustice of the situation will get worse in the near future, because when the old Silver Jubilee bridge reopens, it will also be tolled. Can the Minister tell us of any other previously toll-free bridge having tolls introduced in such a way? The bridge was partly funded by Cheshire County Council when Halton was part of it. Should not the successor authorities—Cheshire East Council, and Cheshire West and Chester Council—get some sort of refund, or will my constituents have to pay three times over for the crossing, having paid for the original construction, having paid their road tax, and paying every time they cross the river?

My constituents are absolutely fed up with being considered the soft touch of the north-west. They are fed up with being discriminated against because of where they live, and they are fed up with living in a country where the authorities apparently condone a postcode lottery. Most of all, they are fed up with being treated like fools, through promises made that are never kept and not being treated the same as residents of other areas because it cannot be afforded. Minister, it is time to bring back some fairness and equity. Give these people some hope that they will be treated the same as everyone else, and hope that when there is injustice, the Government will step in to correct it.
11.16 am

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Michael Ellis): I congratulate the hon. Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders) on securing this debate on transport issues in Cheshire. As it happens, I intend to visit his constituency tomorrow—[Interruption.] It is already scheduled. I will visit Argent Energy’s biodiesel-from-waste production facility, which is an example of the vital importance of Ellesmere Port to the local and national economy. It will be my first visit out of London since becoming Transport Minister, and I am delighted to do that.

Cheshire is a powerhouse of the northern economy and the UK economy. It is the gateway to the north. It links strongly to its neighbours, the large city regions of Liverpool and Manchester, as well as to the engine of the midlands and, vitally, to north Wales. I recognise that, with its £29.3 billion economy employing over 488,000 people in more than 42,000 businesses, Cheshire is an economic success story and home to almost 920,000 people. The region has particular strengths in advanced manufacturing, science and innovation, and professional services. In fact, Cheshire’s economy outperforms the UK average on a number of measures. The local enterprise partnership’s strategic economic plan is entitled “Cheshire and Warrington Matters”, and I absolutely endorse that view.

The north matters, and transport matters in and to the north. Transport in all its forms and modes is essential for the prosperity, growth and wellbeing of the whole nation. I therefore commend the hon. Gentleman on raising these matters on his constituents’ behalf. The Government recognise that good transport infrastructure is essential for productivity, which is why we are investing significantly across the country to deliver sustained economic development.

On 1 April 2018, Transport for the North became a statutory body, according the north powers and funding not seen in other areas to develop and drive forward transport plans, which will support economic growth. The Government have also committed to creating a northern powerhouse to rebalance our economy. Northern Powerhouse Rail, the flagship scheme within TfN’s strategic vision, will provide the east-west rail links that are the Government's own figures. The Northwich area is an example of the vital importance of Ellesmere Port to the local and national economy. It will be my first visit out of London since becoming Transport Minister, and I am delighted to do that.

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That is part of our long-term economic plan—one that we share with the north. As Transport Minister, I am committed to improving journeys for passengers in the north. We are carrying out the biggest investment in transport in the region for a generation. Between 2015 and 2020, the Government will have spent over £13 billion improving and modernising northern transport.

Faisal Rashid: Does the Minister agree that it is unfair to ask the public to pay those tolls when that bridge has been untolled for decades?

Michael Ellis: I will come to tolling in a moment, but it is a long-established principle that goes back to the 1930s that those roads and tunnels are tolled. Figures from the Infrastructure and Projects Authority show that in the three years to 2021, central Government’s planned transport capital investment per head for the north-west, the north-east, Yorkshire and Humber will be higher than for London, the south-east and the south-west. Each year we will invest an average of £248 per person in the north, compared with £236 per person in the south.

We are investing in a smart motorway from junctions 6 to 8 of the M56, which serves Manchester airport, and from junctions 21A to 26 of the M6, which links Cheshire, Merseyside, Greater Manchester and Lancashire. Those are important additions to other localised improvements such as tackling congestion on the A55, which I understand is a major factor, as well as at the Posthouse roundabout. Improvements at junction 8 of the M62 are designed to support the rapid and significant expansion of the Omega employment site, which now employs more than 5,000 people. In the 2018 Budget, the Government published their objectives for the second road investment strategy for 2020 to 2025, and we intend to make available £25.3 billion to further develop the strategic road network. My Department is developing an affordable, deliverable investment plan for that, which will be published in a few months.

Laura Smith (Crewe and Nantwich) (Lab): I am sorry that I missed the start of the debate by my hon. Friend the Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders). Does the Minister agree that the delivery of HS2 is essential for achieving that vision in the north and opening up that capacity?

Michael Ellis: As the hon. Lady knows, we are investing significantly in rail. The reinstatement and reintroduction of services on the Halton curve means that from last month, after a gap of more than 40 years, a direct rail link between the west of Cheshire, north Wales and Liverpool Lime Street now connects those important areas together, unlocking business and opportunities, and providing improved access to the airport. HS2 is, of course, very important, as is the construction of a new station at Warrington West to serve new housing growth. The Northern franchise will lead to the removal of pacers, and brand-new trains will operate on the new Northern Connect service between Liverpool, Warrington Central, Manchester Piccadilly and Manchester airport, as well as a new direct service between Leeds and Chester via Warrington Bank Quay.

Mike Amesbury: For every £4 of investment put into London and the south-east, the north gets £1—all are the Government’s own figures. The Northwich area in my constituency was promised two trains an hour to Manchester, but that has not been delivered by the failing Northern franchise. On tolls, there was a clear promise, as outlined by my hon. Friend the Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders), that a local discount scheme would be extended to Cheshire West, Chester and Warrington, but that promise has not been delivered. Will the Minister answer that point?

Michael Ellis: I will come to that in a moment, as I want to talk a little more about HS2. Despite speculation and claims that we should scrap HS2, our commitment to the full HS2 network remains. From 2027, high-speed
trains will begin serving Cheshire at Crewe, and the legislative process is under way to extend HS2 to Crewe by 2027—six years earlier than originally planned. For Cheshire, Crewe offers a significant opportunity. We are working actively with local partners to maximise the potential of an HS2 hub at Crewe, both for the wider connectivity to HS2 that that will offer, and for its potential as an agent of change and a significant driver for regeneration and development in and around Crewe, Cheshire and the wider region, including Stoke and Staffordshire.

With Transport for the North we are developing a business case for northern powerhouse rail, and exploring the best options to ensure that the huge economic potential of Warrington and the north Cheshire science corridor is served. Through a £200 million-plus growth deal, we are supporting a significant number of local transport improvements that are vital for people going about their daily business. Those include a new bus station in Chester, bypasses for Congleton, Middlewich and Poynton, and a new highway infrastructure in Crewe, Warrington and Birchwood to alleviate congestion. There is a huge amount of investment. We are also supporting the construction of the new Mersey Gateway crossing, which is the largest local transport scheme in the country and benefits residents of Cheshire, Liverpool and beyond.

Faisal Rashid rose—

Michael Ellis: We have just five minutes left, and I wish to get on to tolling. I acknowledge that tolling to support the estuary crossing, and other crossings, is controversial, and it is clear that the hon. Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston has a major disagreement with the Labour Metro Mayor in his region, who changed the hitherto existing position. He is understandably upset about that, but it is a matter for the Mayor, Steve Rotheram. The hon. Gentleman called the tolls “unconscionable” and “racketeering”, and I have noted his comments.

For the Mersey Gateway we were able to ensure that all eligible residents of Halton Borough Council can use the new bridges for free through the local resident discount scheme. It has been the policy of successive UK Governments—both Labour and Conservative—to place tolls on major estuarial crossings, so that those schemes help to pay for the benefits that people receive in those areas. The Government decided to provide free access for the residents of Halton because of their unusual position, given that the existing bridge connects the two parts of the borough on either side of the River Mersey, and that is the only practicable way of travelling between those areas. We looked at the case for extending free tolling to residents of councils beyond Halton, but decided not to do so because the cost to the Government and local authorities would have been disproportionate and substantial.

Since their construction in the 1930s—I think it was 1934—and again in the 1960s and early 1970s, the Mersey tunnels have always been tolled. This is not new. Those tremendous feats of engineering were developed, funded and delivered by the local authorities in the area. The Queensway tunnel, which links Birkenhead and Wallasey with Liverpool, opened in 1934. It cost £8 million at the time and ranked financially as the biggest single municipal enterprise ever undertaken in this country. The Kingsway tunnel, which links Wallasey and Liverpool, opened in 1971 and saw the first example of a giant mechanical “mole” being used in this country. These have always been locally owned assets. Both tunnels have been financed by tolling since they opened, with the toll revenue used to cover the costs of operating, maintaining and enhancing the tunnels, as well as repaying the debt accrued during their construction. Decisions on toll levels rest with the Merseyside local authorities and are now vested in the Liverpool city region mayoral combined authority. They are not a matter for Ministers of the Crown; they are a matter for the Liverpool authorities.

The former Chancellor of the Exchequer may have commented on local tolling in a tweet, or whatever it was, as part of the 2015 general election campaign.

Recognition should be given that my Department worked closely with the combined authority on its review of tunnel tolls, which resulted in a reduction of the fast tag toll for motorists. That was good news, and that is what the Department for Transport did at that time. As hon. Members are probably aware, the process for setting tolls for the Mersey tunnels is set out in the Mersey Tunnels Act 2004, which requires the toll charge to be increased annually in line with inflation, and allows—subject to certain conditions—some of the revenue to be used for wider transport objectives in Merseyside. I hope I have assured hon. Members of the Government’s strong commitment to transport in Cheshire.

Faisal Rashid: The Minister is speaking about millions and billions of pounds of investment in the north but he contradicts himself. Part of that investment should come from the national infrastructure fund, rather than from private investors and tolls, including on an existing bridge that was not previously tolled.

Mr Howarth rose—

Michael Ellis: If the right hon. Gentleman can make his point in 20 seconds, I will give way to him.

Mr Howarth: Does the Minister accept that having to pay an additional £20 a week just to go to work is unacceptable for my constituents and those of my hon. Friends?

Michael Ellis: I suggest that all hon. Members work actively with their regional Mayors and with Cheshire West and Chester Council to explore what may or may not be possible.

Question put and agreed to.

11.30 am

Sitting suspended.
Universal Credit and Debt

Ruth George (High Peak) (Lab): I beg to move, That this House has considered universal credit and debt.

Universal credit affects a huge proportion of our population already. As of April this year, 2 million people were on universal credit, and in the last three months more than 200,000 extra households each month have started a claim. By the time it is fully rolled out, around 7 million households, comprising around 15 million people, will be on universal credit—almost one quarter of the population and 28% of people under pension age—and around 38% of our children will be growing up in households on universal credit. It will affect a whole generation.

The impact of universal credit is felt not only at an individual, but at a societal level, so it is incredibly important that we get it right. That is why I set up the all-party parliamentary group on universal credit, to collect evidence and make recommendations. I thank all those parliamentarians here today on both sides of the House who have contributed to that very productive group, alongside our colleagues in the Lords, charities and researchers. I must especially mention Holly in my office, who has been running it as a labour of love.

Most of all, I thank the individuals who are claiming universal credit, particularly all those who responded to the social media outreach that I and Parliament have done for this debate, telling us about their often very personal experiences. The amount of money we have affects not just our bank balance, but our ability to look after both our physical health, in terms of affording housing and enough to eat, medication and travel to health appointments, and our mental health, particularly when we get into debt.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Lady on securing the debate. Does she agree that until relatively recently there was a broad political consensus on the need to revise the labyrinth of welfare dependency and the bureaucracy surrounding it, but that that should be done in a way that minimises the impact that she has just been outlining and that many of our constituents are suffering from?

Ruth George: I agree; it was a laudable aim, but unfortunately it is not happening in practice, as shown in some of the evidence. That is why I secured this debate.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this debate. We have had numerous debates on universal credit, and I have said this before and will say it again: we should call a halt to universal credit, and if it cannot be reformed we should disband it, because people are suffering as a result. We also now have the working poor, including in cities such as Coventry, where last year 20,000 people used food banks. When we think about it, the impact that that is having on people is incredible.

Ruth George: I hope the evidence I will bring today, and the evidence colleagues will bring from their own experiences, will help to make that case without my having to make it explicitly. There are certainly many changes that should be made. The evidence I have heard from people who say that it is not just the amount of money they have on universal credit, but their powerlessness against a system that takes deductions seemingly at random and with no recourse to justice, that leaves them feeling absolutely hopeless and in despair.

One man from Wales told me on social media:

“It is very difficult to manage on universal credit, payments are very low...I’ve had to go without food to have heat and vice versa. This with my health condition has led me into depression & despair at times. Universal credit are always deducting monies eg carers allowance etc which has left me worse off. It’s very difficult to get through to talk to anyone via phone and very often treated as a second class citizen.”

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): The hon. Lady is making an excellent case for changes to universal credit. Pertinent to what she is saying about people being left unable to pay, does she share my concern that 51% of the food parcels that the Salvation Army distributes are to people who come as a result of having insufficient support from the universal credit system? Does she agree that maybe we should put back the money that was taken out of the budget?

Dr Dan Poulter (Central Suffolk and North Ipswich) (Con): rose—

Ellie Reeves (Lewisham West and Penge) (Lab): rose—

Ruth George: I will go across the House first.

Dr Poulter: The hon. Lady is making some good points, and she is right to draw an association between adverse life events, debt and poor mental health. On the issue facing many of the people she is using as examples, who are experiencing difficulties with universal credit, is it not the case that the wait of five weeks to receive universal credit exacerbates debt issues and the challenges facing people in sometimes very difficult circumstances, and that the Government perhaps need to look at that as a priority in helping to improve the system?

Ruth George: The hon. Gentleman has pre-empted part of my speech. The five-week wait for payments is doing a tremendous amount of damage, putting people into debt right at the start of their claim.

That is not to say that universal credit has not improved—I am sure we will hear a lot about that from the Minister. I pay credit to the Department for listening,
and especially to the current Secretary of State, who has made changes beyond those forced on her by High Court cases. However, there is still an enormous amount to do to help people to get by and feel secure with universal credit.

Ellie Reeves: A number of my constituents are living below the poverty line, because that is what their universal credit calculation assesses them as being entitled to. It is not surprising that three quarters of those who are in rent arrears are on universal credit, while only one quarter are not. Does my hon. Friend agree that the way we calculate welfare payments to the most vulnerable must be looked at again?

Ruth George: Absolutely. As I will come on to discuss, the problem is not only welfare payments, but the deductions made from those welfare payments. People who are already in poverty are having huge deductions taken from their incomes with almost no recourse to justice.

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Ruth George: I will take one final intervention, then I must make progress.

Jamie Stone: I thank the hon. Lady for giving way. This is a point that I imagine the hon. Member for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey (Drew Hendry) will elaborate on, but the Highland Council’s budgets have been hit to the extent of £2.5 million just from dealing with universal credit. That money is money that we could be spending on classroom assistants, who are facing swinging cuts not of their own making. Should that money not really be repaid to the Highland Council to make up for all this?

Ruth George: All councils need an uplift in their budget, but if the Department for Work and Pensions was to give money away, I would say it should go into the pockets of the people who are suffering at the sharpest end of universal credit.

We have already seen four years of a benefits freeze that has cut more than 6% from those benefits. That is on top of the three-year freeze in 2011 and the 1% benefit cap from 2014. On housing, the impact of those freezes, together with limiting local housing allowance to the lowest 30% of rents, means that now tenants in 97% of areas must make up a rent shortfall out of their universal credit. In one in five areas, that shortfall for a family with children in a two-bedroom home is at least £100 month. Shelter has calculated that a huge amount taken out of an already low income, but universal credit will mean even more reductions.

With managed migration having been delayed, most people will transfer on to universal credit due to a change in circumstances—anything from having their first baby, losing a job or moving to a different local authority area. Those 5 million or so households are not due to receive any transitional protection if they were better off on legacy benefits. Contrary to what Parliament was promised when the cuts to universal credit were pushed through in 2015 and 2016, most people will immediately be worse off.

Even after the changes to universal credit, the Joseph Rowntree Foundation has calculated that, although 5.6 million people in working households will gain an average of £3,000 a year, 5.1 million working people will lose an average of £2,300, including 1.7 million who are already in poverty. Of non-working households, 1.9 million people will gain an average of £2,000 a year, but 2.6 million people will lose an average of £1,400 a year, with half of those—1.3 million—already in poverty. Overall, even after the changes, 7.5 million people will gain from universal credit, but 7.7 million people will lose out, including 3 million households already in poverty. While the Government may state that more is being spent on universal credit, which may well be correct, that does not change the fact that the majority of people already on very low incomes, many of whom are in poverty, will be worse off.

Even those who are supposed to be better off on universal credit often struggle because of the deductions from their payments. According to yesterday’s written answer from the Minister, who I thank for responding in time for the debate:

“Of all eligible claims to Universal Credit Full Service due a payment in Feb 2019, 57% (840,000 claims) had a deduction.”

An answer to a further parliamentary question showed that an average of 10% of all universal credit is now deducted from people’s claims. Almost everyone seeing deductions took the advance payment introduced to help people get through the minimum five-week wait for their first payment. Some 60% of people take that advance, mainly because rent is payable in advance, whereas universal credit is payable in arrears. That advance has to be paid off over 12 months, so people are paying 13 months’ rent out of 12 months of income. With a system that in 97% of areas does not even give enough money each month for one month’s rent, it is not surprising that people are struggling, and that five-week wait is absolutely part of that.

On top of repayments for advances, another 440,000 households are also repaying at least one other debt for benefit overpayments, social fund loans or other advances. That does not include third-party debts such as rent arrears, utility bills or council tax debt. The Department does not keep data on those debts that it also deducts. I question why not, as it clearly has the data on the deductions being made and should monitor the impact on vulnerable people. Of those 840,000 households seeing deductions, half were of up to 20% of the standard allowance in universal credit, 170,000 were between 21% and 30%, 238,000 were between 31% and 40%, and 13,000 were above 40%.

With 40% of the standard allowance as the current maximum deduction supposed to be permitted under universal credit, that means deductions of £1,275 a month for a single person’s claim or £2,300 a month for a couple. Of the 3.3 million couple-parents already losing an average of £2,500 a year under universal credit—more than £200 a month—a majority see deductions on top of those losses of up to another £200 a month, plus their rent top-up of around £100 a month, so many will be £500 a month, or more than £1,000 a week, worse off.

It is not surprising that we see such an increase in people going to food banks and struggling with debt, like one of my constituents, Gareth, who is struggling to keep his head above water. He suffers from anxiety and depression. His mother died recently and he split
from his partner so had to move into his own place and claim universal credit. He had been working as a cleaner but had to give up his job. He was awarded universal credit of £692 a month, including £374 for housing, although the lowest rent he could find is £500 a month, so he has to make up the shortfall of £126 a month. Some £58 a month is being deducted for his advance payment, and £46 a month for an earlier budgeting and crisis loan, leaving him with £588 a month, of which his rent is £500, so he is left with just £20 a week for all his bills and food. He is experiencing extreme poverty, which is obviously impacting on his health.

Those deductions are things he knows about, but many are not. The second highest number of deductions are for tax credit overpayments, and two thirds of people migrating on to universal credit from tax credits are seeing deductions for an overpayment. The Treasury states that £6.9 billion of tax credit overpayments will be transferred on to universal credit. The reduction in the excess earnings limit in one year from £5,000 to just £1,000 in 2012 has meant that constant overpayments are now hard-wired into tax credits, but in many cases these are historical.

Only 29% of that £6.9 billion relates to 2016-17 onwards. More than half relates to between 2011-12 and 2015-16, and 16% is even older. Many people just were not aware of these overpayments and are not given the opportunity to challenge them. Locally, I have the case of Mrs G, who has a disability. She migrated on to universal credit because she had to move into accessible accommodation, which happened to be in the neighbouring local authority. Only after she had claimed was informed that she had tax credit overpayments of around £450 from local authority. Only after she had claimed was informed she had to move into accessible case of Mrs G, who has a disability. She migrated on to universal credit because she had to move into accessible

The inability to challenge deductions—or even, in some cases, to find out about them—leaves people feeling utterly helpless and either angry or hopeless. People often receive a note on their journal saying:

"We agreed to pay a fine from your universal credit",

but they are not even told how much the fine is, where it comes from or how to challenge it. I have seen cases of much more than the 40% limit being taken from people’s standard allowance, leaving them with practically nothing to live on. Advisers on the universal credit helpline have been unhelpful and aggressive, even to Citizens Advice and the welfare rights service.

Real examples like those from in and around my constituency, where limited numbers of people are on universal credit, bear out the problems illustrated in those answers to parliamentary questions. They are key drivers for the increase in food bank use and debt and rent arrears, and are a significant reason for the huge increase in depression and anxiety.

The Government must act. It will not necessarily take anything very radical. Many of the actions have already been agreed, but they need to be brought forward and done now. We need to look at the five-week wait, as I think is agreed across the House, and at the very least, as a first step, bring forward the two-week run-on of jobseeker’s allowance, employment and support allowance and income support from July 2020 to July 2019. The maximum 30% cap on deductions needs to apply now, not in October, when another 800,000 people will have applied for universal credit and be suffering 40% reductions.

And people suffering hardship should be able to reduce that.

The extended repayment period for advances from 12 months to 16 months should apply now, not in October 2021. Historical tax credit overpayments should be written off, as the Government stated they were doing back in 2011. Later overpayments should be proved and the opportunity given to challenge them properly before they are collected. The benefit freeze needs to be ended and the cap on rents restored at least to the 30th percentile. And the monthly assessment period should be reviewed, as the High Court has stated it should be.

Just the measures that I have listed would be an enormous help for the hundreds of thousands of people—almost 1 million—suffering already under deductions from universal credit. If this is test and learn, those people are the guinea pigs that this Government are experimenting on. The Government can make changes. We in Parliament get a second chance at legislation, but the people who are suffering this system now are left with spiralling debts, to which they can see no end. They are driven by the unresponsive system even to try to take their own life. They do not get a second chance at living a better life. Their children do not get another chance at a childhood not marred by poverty. Another 60,000 families will apply for universal credit next week. That is why it is not just our job but our absolute duty to get it right.

Several hon. Members rose—

Sir Henry Bellingham (in the Chair): Order. In addition to thanking the hon. Member for High Peak (Ruth George) for her exemplary and moving speech, I point out that a lot of right hon. and hon. Members are hoping to speak, so we will have a limit of between two and three minutes on speeches—voluntarily, at the moment.

2.52 pm

Peter Aldous (Waveney) (Con): I hope that as I am the only speaker from the Government side, you might show me a little leniency, Sir Henry, but anyway, it is a
pleasure to serve under your chairmanship. I congratulate the hon. Member for High Peak (Ruth George) on securing the debate.

The full roll-out of universal credit in Lowestoft started in May 2016. The process has not been straightforward. Many of the most vulnerable in society have been put under enormous pressure and have faced real challenges in getting by day to day. The situation has improved: the Government have listened and introduced changes. However, much more needs to be done if universal credit is to achieve its goals of transforming people’s lives in a positive way; encouraging and supporting them into work; and simplifying the welfare system.

I sense that at the outset, the sheer scale of the task of introducing universal credit was not recognised. It is a mammoth task that requires a complete change of mindset by everyone involved and the implementation of an enormous IT project. Some of the assumptions on which universal credit was based have been shown to be idealistic and could not be implemented in a fair way in the real world.

Jobcentres, citizens advice bureaux and councils have stepped up to the plate and really worked hard to get the new system working fairly and properly. As I said, the Government have been listening, and have introduced changes to improve the roll-out. They are right to adopt the test and learn approach, but more needs to be done to ensure that debt, which burdens people, causing distress and worry, does not unnecessarily build up. I shall quickly highlight five areas in which action is required to alleviate the albatross of arrears.

First, serious consideration needs to be given to abolishing the five-week wait for universal credit. The think-tank Bright Blue has concluded that the initial waiting period is a design feature that is inherently flawed. Second, the feedback that I am receiving from constituents is that the lack of transitional protection for former recipients of the severe disability premium is pushing claimants into debt. The Government need to get on with addressing that.

Thirdly, universal credit needs to be adapted to address the needs of those on zero-hours contracts. Quite often, such work is heavily affected by the weather, and during lull periods, in which people claim universal credit, the delay in payments leads to an inescapable spiral of debt, which is never paid off from one season to another.

Fourthly, there is compelling evidence from organisations supporting those facing domestic violence that the single payment arrangements are putting the victims of domestic violence at added risk, with perpetrators having universal credit payments paid into their own bank accounts. That means that they can use the money as a tool for coercive control. To address that, universal credit payments should be separate by default.

Finally, East Suffolk Citizens Advice has advised me that the Department for Work and Pensions does not provide it with feedback when it makes a request for assistance with the journal of a client whom it is supporting. I appreciate that there are data protection requirements, but that issue needs to be fully addressed if universal support is to be fully effective.

I commend both the Minister and the relatively new Secretary of State—I hope that she stays in her post—for listening and responding. I acknowledge that theirs is a difficult task, but I urge them to take on board the further feedback from this debate. For the sake of the vulnerable people who rely on universal credit, we must get it right.

2.56 pm

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Henry. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for High Peak (Ruth George) on an absolutely outstanding opening speech. There is not much more that one can say. However, I will pick up on a few points.

To understand the rise in poverty that people are facing across the country—not in isolated areas, as some on the Government side would like to say—we need look no further than social security policies, unfortunately, and universal credit is a key aspect of that. The Child Poverty Action Group said back in 2015 that an additional 1 million children would be living in poverty. Just a couple of weeks ago, Policy in Practice estimated, on behalf of the Children’s Commissioner, that half of low-income households would lose nearly £3,500 a year, which will see child poverty double. The figure is already at 4 million—three quarters of the children living in poverty are from working families—and it is set to double. That is down to three social security policies: the two-child limit, the benefits cap and universal credit—particularly, as my hon. Friend said, the five-week wait, and the repayment not just of the advance loan but of other debts.

We recognise the intervention in last autumn’s Budget, but it is paltry compared with the £12 billion that was cut in the 2015 summer Budget. It did not go even halfway to restoring what was cut. It is still the case that 40% of people on UC will be and are worse off—this applies especially to disabled people; 1 million disabled people are worse off under universal credit—by nearly £2,000. It also applies to the self-employed and single parents; they are all worse off as a result of universal credit. We have touched on the natural migration that is happening, separately from managed migration, as a result of a change in circumstances.

The UN special rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights, Philip Alston, said last month that the UK’s poorest people face lives that are “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short”. He accused Ministers of being in a state of denial about the impact of policies, including the roll-out of universal credit, and referred to the “systematic immiseration” of a significant part of the British population. I know that his comments have caused some consternation on the Government side, but we have only to look at Westminster tube station to see our homeless people. Two thirds of those in homeless refuges are people who have issues with universal credit. We all have constituency cases—I shall mention a few if that is okay, Sir Henry—of people who are really suffering.

Sally is a single mum who moved out to escape an abusive relationship. Due to her change in circumstances, she has lost £400 from her universal credit. Katie’s employers made a mess of their returns, and she was left with £67 to live on. It was her employer’s error. She said:

“Every time I call they just say there’s nothing they can do and I just have to wait for a decision. Please help me as I’m at the end of hope!”
June was in receipt of employment and support allowance with a severe disability premium. Again due to a change in circumstances, she lost £300 a month. Karen works for the Greater Manchester police and has a two-year-old daughter. She was told by the jobcentre that universal credit would pay for 85% of her childcare. She had to pay it up front, but she was still waiting six months later. That is unacceptable, and it is happening up and down the country.

The Minister will be aware that universal credit has a bad press. In debates such as this, it is our job to draw attention to the dire circumstances that people are facing. There are also rumours, based on leaked emails, that there is a planned propaganda exercise to try to restore the public’s faith in universal credit. I would be grateful if the Minister could address that. I have gone over my time, so I will end there.

Sir Henry Bellingham (in the Chair): I am afraid we will now have to move to a two-minute limit on speeches.

3.1 pm

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Henry. I congratulate the hon. Member for High Peak (Ruth George) on securing this debate.

In Inverness and the Highlands, we have had universal credit for six years. Thanks to the Tory-Lib Dem coalition, we were already suffering from austerity. There was one food bank in Inverness. With the addition of universal credit, problems rocketed. We now have a food bank in every quarter of the city and beyond. My constituents face choosing between buying clothes for their children, switching on the heating and putting food on the table.

Other hon. Members will recommend changes, but given the extremely limited time that I have, I will focus on the debt accumulated for every single household in Highland, and give a warning to hon. Members who are dealing with universal credit in their constituency case-loads. Highland Council has incurred debts, directly attributed to universal credit, of £2.5 million. Of those debts, £600,000 is directly due to administrative costs resulting from universal credit. The details of those costs have been provided to the Minister and the UK Government. They have said in written answers to questions that no council should bear an additional burden or debt as a result of universal credit, yet it is a fact that this debt is out there.

It is incumbent on the Minister and his Government to sort this out now for the people of the Highlands, to repay the money that those people are due, and to ensure that councils across the rest of Scotland, and the other nations of the UK, are not similarly burdened. This shambolic roll-out of universal credit continues to cause harm in people’s homes and to their health, and to harm those who are not directly involved in universal credit.

3.3 pm

Grahame Morris (Easington) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship for the first time, Sir Henry. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for High Peak (Ruth George) for securing this debate, and for her excellent speech setting out the issues. In the time I have, it is not possible to repeat the arguments, but it is clear from the experiences hon. Members have related, from all parts of the United Kingdom, that universal credit is not working.

The Trussell Trust is heavily involved in this debate, and it supports the points put by my hon. Friend, particularly regarding the five-week wait. This subject comes up frequently. In both Houses in the past year, there have been 1,858 references, 70 debates, seven written statements and two Divisions on universal credit, yet we do not seem to be any further forward.

The overwhelming majority of experiences quoted in debates and put forward in questions about universal credit are negative. There is no doubt that it is increasing hardship. The Government must recognise the problems being caused. It has been suggested that it is a flexible and personalised system offering unprecedented support, but that is clearly not the case. We need firm action from Ministers, not just assurances about mitigating the worst effects.

In the few seconds remaining, I ask the Minister whether he thinks it is reasonable, when people are facing such dreadful financial hardship, for the Department to spend over £23 million advertising universal credit in a single newspaper, the Metro? I feel that is a shocking waste of money. [Interruption.] I have received a written parliamentary answer from the Department showing that it is true. I would welcome the Minister’s comments on that.

3.5 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the hon. Member for High Peak (Ruth George) for bringing this debate. As I often do, I will give a quick example. A troubled young man from my constituency, from a good family, is unable to deal with his social situation and finds himself sleeping rough. As he is a new claimant, he has to move on to universal credit. He goes to the housing executive, which tells him that he is not a priority, and to self-refer to a hostel. He depends on his family.

I want to put on record that the staff at the Ards benefits office—Frances, the manager, Lee and Donna—are tremendous and exceptional. If every person had such people to respond to them, it would be very helpful. They do their best to help, but they can only do what the system allows them to do.

Due to problems in the past, my constituent is already paying £10 a week out of his jobseeker’s allowance, and £40 a month comes off his housing benefit, which leaves him with £30 to live on. Internet is essential for those making online claims. What if somebody cannot use the library or another place with wi-fi? He waits five weeks for a claim that is not even back paid. What if he did not have a loving family, doing what no one would expect them to do for a 40-year-old man? Is this system working? I say to the Minister: it is not—far from it.

I meet people with severe and immediate financial hardship every day. Nearly a quarter—24%—of all universal credit claimants have a deduction of above 20% of their standard allowance. Research by StepChange found that even a deduction of 5% would push nearly half of StepChange clients on benefits into a negative budget. When a 40% deduction is applied—these are serious figures—70% will be pushed into a negative budget.
I ask the Minister: can we give staff such as Frances, Lee and Donna in the social security office in Newtownards the opportunity to read a situation, and allow them the discretion to allow past bad debt to be repaid at a nominal rate? We should understand that the private sector does not understand the bedroom tax, and rent does not come down to what the Government say it should be. It just does not work.

3.7 pm  

Yvonne Fovargue (Makerfield) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for High Peak (Ruth George) on her speech. It is a fact that more people who go on to universal credit are seeking debt advice. In my constituency, 90% of new claimants in social housing go into rent arrears. Of those, 60% go into arrears of over £600. Those who can least afford the benefits freeze have been hit the hardest by it. We have talked about the five-week wait and the advances. [Interruption.]

Sir Henry Bellingham (in the Chair): Order. We have a Division. I will suspend the sitting for 15 minutes, assuming there is one Division. We can resume with the hon. Lady when we come back.

3.8 pm  

Sitting suspended for a Division in the House.

3.20 pm  

On resuming—

Sir Henry Bellingham (in the Chair): Order. The debate will now conclude at 12 minutes past 4.

Yvonne Fovargue: Thank you, Sir Henry. I was talking about the five-week wait and advances. Even with a 30% payment back, 65% of StepChange clients who are in debt will still have problems paying. They will still have problems paying their gas, electricity and other bills. I want to ask the Minister how advisers ensure that repayments are affordable. I believe that there are safeguards, but I have never heard what they are. Do they use a single financial statement, as most creditors do? Do they look at other debts? We know that many people on universal credit who have had the five-week wait have other debts. They have gone to high-cost lenders and owe on the gas and electricity.

I also want to ask the Minister whether the debts to Departments are included in the proposed breathing space scheme. That would be a help. At least it would give people time to work it out, but unless the DWP accepts affordable repayments, even that will not help people on universal credit who are being forced into debt. I have always said that simplifying the system was a great aim, but people’s lives are not simple, and the people I am talking about are the ones who can least afford a bump in the road. Throwing people into debt makes life more complicated. It makes more people go to the doctor with mental health problems and depression, and eventually it costs the state more.

3.22 pm  

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): This is a great opportunity for the Minister—a valuable chance to hear from different constituencies about the situation of those claiming benefits through universal credit.

Gloucester’s experience broadly mirrors that of the country over the past 18 months. The roll-out has steadily expanded. By February, just over 4,000 people were on universal credit. That represents 26% of our population—slightly more than the 24% figure for Great Britain as a whole, and marginally less than the figure for the south-west region, which is 27%. The figures have continued to rise and I suspect in Gloucester it is now close to 5,000 people.

I pay tribute to the staff of Jobcentre Plus, especially the work coaches, who are implementing the policy and working closely with my office when constituents have difficulties. It is of course true that there are difficulties, and 117 of my constituents have been in touch with me and my office about issues. The vast majority of them are having difficulties with application forms. One of my staff, who is dyslexic, did the form herself. It took her seven minutes. I have tested it myself and it took me marginally longer, but broadly the application form is challenging only for those without personal internet access or much experience of digital processing. That, of course, is why the contract with Citizens Advice is so important.

I shall briefly share the Citizens Advice experience of UC inquiries, which is important. First, the calculation of benefit entitlements is more transparent than under legacy benefits, which is, of course, a significant improvement. Secondly, with the exception of those in receipt of disability benefits, it sees little difference between UC and legacy benefits. Thirdly, the increased availability of advance payments has improved the situation, but further flexibility would, it is noted, be beneficial. The last comment is that it is fairly commonly recognised that those in receipt of disability benefits are worse off than they would be under the previous system. Perhaps the Minister could comment on that. In my experience the situation is varied. People suffering from multiple sclerosis have quite often received greater benefits than previously, so there seems to be a little variation from disability to disability.

Clearly, debt is an important issue. Large numbers of our constituents have debt issues. More research is needed on how those debt issues arise and why so many people have so much debt when they come on to universal credit. That is, of course, a wider issue than universal credit itself.

3.25 pm  

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): I shall be very brief. I know that there are many aspects to universal credit, but I want to focus on the in-built five-week wait, which is pushing people into severe hardship and is cruel in the extreme. To say that advance payments address that is simply disingenuous, since those payments are unaffordable loans by another name, offering claimants the Hobson’s choice of hardship now or hardship later. That must urgently be addressed.

The loans have to be repaid and take no account of people’s ability to repay them. That is how other loans work, but the DWP advance payment loans have repayments set at a fixed level, which can be hard to challenge even if people fall into financial hardship while trying to repay them. Renegotiating the repayment levels is rare, but even if someone manages it, they are by that time already likely to be in serious financial difficulty with other bills.
The debt that people are pushed into can sometimes overwhelm them, or can undermine them so much that entering or sustaining employment becomes a much greater challenge, as people are forced to rely on food banks. The only way to deal with that pernicious aspect of universal credit is to remove the need for bridging loans by ending the five-week wait. There should be a single, non-refundable assessment payment for all claimants during the five-week wait period, with immediate effect.

If the Minister does nothing else today, or during his time with his current portfolio, he can and should do one thing: abolish the five-week wait. By doing so, he could make life much easier for many households who are struggling under the system as it is currently designed.

3.27 pm

Gerald Jones (Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Henry. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for High Peak (Ruth George) on securing the debate.

There is an argument for a simplified benefit system, but what we know of universal credit is that it has led to many cases where people are trapped in further poverty owing to the way the system is administered. In its current form, it is causing too much hardship and stress. Every week my constituency office, like many others, supports local people who have been placed in difficult situations. I also work closely with the citizens advice bureau, providing support jointly to constituents in need of advice and support. According to my local citizens advice bureau, the issue of universal credit was raised with it on 1,882 occasions last year. I think that that highlights the scale of the need.

I want to mention advance payments. Because of the wait before people get their first payment, many fall into debt. People clearly need the advance in the initial period, as they have no money to live. However, the repayments are often too high and that leads to continuing debt problems, which cause anxiety and stress. There is much confusion about the repayment period for advance payments. In my constituency, although the maximum period is 12 months, I have heard of cases where repayment is initiated within three months. Again, that causes further debt, anxiety and stress. Claimants have a choice of repayment period up to a maximum of 12 months, and up to 40% of their claim.

As we have heard this afternoon, the Government are planning changes to the repayment period, which will be a maximum of 16 months, with deductions of no more than 30% of the claim. Those changes are in the right direction, but they do not go far enough. We have heard more today about looking at other debts, and to make them a lot sooner. People need help now, and to make them a lot sooner. People need help now, and to make them a lot sooner. People need help now, and to make them a lot sooner.

3.29 pm

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Sir Henry.

This debate is in stark contrast to the advertisements for universal credit that we see in certain newspapers. Those adverts should not include a DWP or universal credit logo; those advertisements would not look out of place in an episode of “Jackanory”. As a constituent pointed out to me yesterday, one advertisement mentioned the advance payment, but did not say it was a loan. Does that advance come in wrapping paper and ribbon? The advance payment is a loan, and the Government cannot keep denying that or saying that it is something else. That loan is adding to universal credit debt, as is the five-week wait. As has been said, many of those leaving work were paid weekly or fortnightly, and they then have to wait five weeks. People are refusing the advance because it is a loan.

Some 60% of those with debt reductions are not getting the help they need from creditors, so they are borrowing more money. Those with deductions on universal credit are becoming more reliant on foodbanks, and Scottish Welfare Fund crisis grants are increasing all the time as a result. Some 40% of those with deductions are also behind with other household bills, such as food or fuel—it is a circle. My great fear is that the Government are not following Cabinet Office guidelines on debt collection, and that this is become a loan shark’s charter.

This is a serious issue, and I hope that the Minister and his Department will get a grip on how they deal with debts and universal credit.

3.31 pm

Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for High Peak (Ruth George) on securing this important debate. With the best will in the world, this seems to have become a state-devised system that, by its design, drives people into gross financial hardship. We have heard about the difficulties of the five-week wait, and about the 40% repayment rate on any debt that occurs. We have not talked about the advance up-front costs of childcare payments and the 85% payment that can be obtained through universal credit.

My constituent is 21. She is a single parent and has an apprenticeship in a doctor’s surgery. She is paid the lower apprenticeship rate, and takes home just £111 a week. She has to pay her childcare upfront. The element of childcare provision in her UC was suspended, and because she obviously required that childcare, she ended up with more than £2,000 of debt. Only the fact that her parents could bail her out helped her through that difficult situation, and an intervention from my office subsequently got that money repaid.

How can we have a system that drives people into debt? There is undoubtedly a link between the two things. It could be rental debt; a local housing association stated that after the launch of universal credit its rent arrears increased immediately, and that as of June 2018, UC claimants accounted for 40% of its overall rent debt. That cannot be allowed to continue. In 2009-10, 350 people used the local food bank, but recent figures suggest that that number is now 2,525. That food bank is now so overburdened that it will have to close to focus on its core system—something has to change.

3.33 pm

Karin Smyth (Bristol South) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Henry. I also wanted to mention childcare payments, but I will write to the Minister separately and concentrate my remarks on tax credit debt.
Three weeks ago, I was told in an answer to a parliamentary question that 255,000 claimants—one in six universal credit claimants—had received a deduction for alleged historical tax credit overpayments. Last week, in widely reported coverage, Citizens Advice stated that the figure was actually 410,000, which is closer to a quarter of all claimants. Will the Minister clarify that point and say which figure is most accurate? Even the lower figure of a quarter of a million overpayments and the associated debt, as a result of problems within HMRC that are perhaps years old or involve arbitrarily fixed rates that do not reflect people's wider circumstances, are a real problem. Crucially, many people do not know that they can challenge that overpayment, and its impact is considerable.

I urge the Minister to put in place a new minimum repayment threshold for all non-fraud overpayments or other DWP debt. That threshold should genuinely reflect living costs and not discourage claimants from seeking work. There must be flexibility to consider individual circumstances, and claimants should be encouraged to complete income and expenditure forms, and only be asked to pay what they can afford. No family should ever receive less than their standard allowance or be worse off in employment, and no family should be forced into greater debt by the actions of the DWP.

Jo Platt (Leigh) (Lab/Co-op): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for High Peak (Ruth George) on securing this debate. Leigh has been a pilot area for universal credit since 2013, so as a representative of a northern town with extensive experience of universal credit, I can say with certainty and after countless surgeries that it is driving people into poverty, into food banks, and into debt.

We know that universal credit is not working because a recent report by the Association of Retained Council Housing found that in the north of England, 75% of universal credit households were in arrears, compared with 39% of non-universal credit households. In our local authority, universal credit tenants have £1.9 million of rent arrears, which is a shocking £534 per tenant on average. Those are not isolated cases; that is caused by the failing system. With a 97% likelihood of local universal credit claimants falling into arrears, only a total and fundamental overhaul of our welfare system will suffice.

The hard reality facing those going on to universal credit is a choice between a lengthy delay for the first payment or an unaffordable loan that only kicks the can of financial hardship further down the road. Since universal credit was introduced in Leigh, my mailbox has been full of individuals desperate to receive assistance because, through no fault of their own, they have found themselves left down by a system that is so complicated that they struggle to navigate it. How do the Government respond? The Minister can take one of two paths: either he will listen to the facts, stories and experts, or he will follow the Chancellor's example and claim there is no crisis. For the sake of my constituents who are tackling mounting debt, I sincerely hope he will choose the former path.

Danielle Rowley (Midlothian) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for High Peak (Ruth George) on securing this debate, on her fantastic speech, and on her fantastic, dedicated work on welfare. She is a tireless campaigner.

As many of today's contributions and evidence from Citizens Advice Scotland have shown, debt is built into the universal credit system. My hon. Friend the Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams) spoke about survivors of domestic abuse, and I too wish to focus on that important area. Survivors of domestic abuse often flee relationships with little or no resources, and often after being subjected to economic abuse. For them, the five-week wait is particularly damaging. Although advances are available, that is a loan that must be paid back.

The charity Refuge recommends that survivors of domestic abuse be exempt from repaying advances, as the initial period after fleeing an abusive relationship can be costly. People often have to buy a lot of possessions and set up a new home and a new life. If they have to repay an advance, their future income will be heavily reduced. I hope the Minister will consider that issue and tell me his thoughts.

As I have highlighted previously, single household payments can easily be used by coercive or abusive partners to trap people in an abusive relationship. Rent arrears accumulated under single payments mean that survivors have restricted options when they are fleeing, and it is common for landlords to refuse to accept tenants who have arrears, even if those arrears were accrued due to domestic abuse. That huge issue must be ironed out.

I wanted to talk about some constituency cases today, but I do not have time. The constituency cases that we raise time and again in respect of universal credit are not unique; this is happening everywhere. This issue is raised on the doorsteps, in our surgeries and with our neighbours. It is such a huge issue and I am fed up with speaking about this cruel system that does not work. The Government must take their fingers out of their ears and stop defending it. They must work with Members across the House who have spoken up about this issue, stop this system and rehaul it once and for all.

Sir Henry Bellingham: Before I call the SNP spokesman, I thank right hon. and hon. Members for showing so much restraint. The Opposition spokesmen can now go from eight minutes to 10 minutes. I call Mr Neil Gray.

Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): Thank you, Sir Henry. It is a pleasure to serve under your astute chairmanship, which has allowed a bit of latitude in the debate and for so many voices to be heard. I am very grateful to the hon. Member for High Peak (Ruth George) for securing the debate. She covered a lot of ground in her speech and I will try my best to sum up her contribution and the other important contributions that have been made.

The hon. Lady spoke about deductions being taken, apparently at random. I totally agree. She also mentioned carer's allowance. She may not be aware that in Scotland
we have looked to do something different on carer’s allowance. We are uprating carer’s allowance to better acknowledge, in some small way, the great work that carers do in our society. I encourage her to look at that.

The hon. Lady was right to say that universal credit has improved. There have been some improvements of late, and I am sure she would agree that the changes appear to acknowledge some of the problems that we have all been campaigning on, but do not go the full distance in terms of resolving the problems that are clearly still there—for instance, the two-child policy, the benefit freeze and the five-week wait. I will come back to some of those. She was also right to highlight the so-called major budget interventions that were made by the Government on universal credit. They do not come close to making up for the cuts that were made to it in the 2015 Budget, which made it almost unrecognisable from what was originally envisaged. I commend the hon. Lady on her speech.

The hon. Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous) and for Midlothian (Danielle Rowley) touched on the issue of separate payments. The Scottish Government and the previous Administration in Northern Ireland have looked to try to resolve that, and I would encourage the UK Government to look at that again and to stop insisting on charging for that.

The hon. Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams) is an authoritative voice on the subject, and it was good to see her here. She was right to draw on the evidence put forward by Philip Alston, the UN special rapporteur on extreme poverty. The UK Government have chosen to attack him personally, rather than to address the issues that he has quite legitimately raised.

My hon. Friend the Member for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey (Drew Hendry) has possibly the greatest experience of us all on the impact of universal credit. He was right to raise the issue of the £2.3 million debt that Highland Council now finds itself in, and the £600,000 in administration costs that the UK Government should be paying up for. Of course, it is a triple whammy: UK Government austerity on public finances, UK Government austerity on personal finances and now the local authorities have that added burden on their services.

As the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) did, I commend DWP staff, who try to resolve the issues we raise with them. They do their best to deal with those issues within the stringent policies implemented by UK Ministers.

The hon. Member for Great Grimsby (Melanie Onn) was absolutely right about advanced childcare costs—I have had many similar cases. I find it incredible that universal credit is paid in arrears, yet the bills that people have to pay on childcare must largely be paid in advance.

The hon. Member for Gloucester (Richard Graham) looked to paint a particular picture on universal credit. I encourage him to look at the Citizens Advice Scotland report and briefing that was available ahead of the debate. I think it would contradict and enlighten him greatly.

My hon. Friend the Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson) pre-empted much of what I have to say on the five-week wait. I appreciate her intervention. My hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens) dissected the DWP's propaganda regarding universal credit that has been out of late.

I also commend the hon. Members for Easington (Grahame Morris), Bristol South (Karim Smyth), Makerfield (Yvonne Fovargue), Leigh (Jo Platt) and Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney (Gerald Jones). This has been a very broad debate, with many good contributions.

As has already been highlighted, there are a number of issues at play on universal credit and debt. I am grateful to Scope, Shelter, the Child Poverty Action Group, StepChange and Citizens Advice Scotland for their briefings.

The first issue is the five-week wait. I appreciate that the Government have at least partially acknowledged that there is a problem, by looking to extend certain legacy benefits and to expand advance payments. However, much of the run-on for legacy benefits will not happen until next year, and no run-on help is available for those who are in touch with universal credit for the first time. Those fixes are not in themselves going to solve the problem, as the evidence from CPAG and Citizens Advice Scotland confirms. That is why I have asked Ministers to look at making what is now the assessment for an advance the first UC assessment, and making the advance essentially the first payment. If the recipient is shown to need the money at that point, why would the Government deny them that as part of universal credit, rather than financially penalising them for months after? I do not think there would be a major cost implication, other than to shift payments to the front end of the claim instead of further down the line.

Payment of housing costs to landlords is a major issue for both tenants and landlords. My local authority, North Lanarkshire Council, is having serious problems with the inflexibility of the current system on when rent payments are made. That means that I have received loads of cases where council tenants are getting chased for rent arrears, when the delay is in fact caused by the DWP. The DWP has acknowledged that issue, but there is no date for when it will move from a four-weekly to a monthly payment system. I encourage the DWP to work with local authorities and other housing providers to establish a more flexible system that enables them to know for certain when rent is to be paid.

The benefit freeze has already been raised. It is having a major impact on indebtedness as part of universal credit. While most working-age benefits have been frozen for four years, living costs have risen sharply with higher than anticipated levels of inflation. There is not an expectation that the freeze will continue beyond this financial year, but the Treasury is going to more than recoup its estimated savings from the policy this year. Quite frankly, low-income families have paid more than their fair share towards this Government’s policies and the benefit freeze should have ended this year. What estimate have the Government made of the impact that the benefit freeze has had on low-income families and poverty levels? What other detrimental impacts has it had?

Direct deduction rates must be looked at again. The hon. Member for High Peak was right to focus on that issue. If only DWP policy were to match that of the Cabinet Office, as my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow South West said, which advocates fairness in
Mike Amesbury: Very briefly.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for High Peak (Ruth George) for securing this vital debate on universal credit, and for all that she does. The debate’s importance has been powerfully illustrated by the presence of 26 Members in this Chamber.

As my hon. Friend rightly pointed out, universal credit was supposedly designed to be the flagship policy of a reformed welfare system that would protect the most vulnerable in our society, support people into work and act as a safety net for those who needed it most. However, as hon. Members’ speeches today have shown, the experience for hundreds of thousands of our constituents has been chaos and hardship, sometimes resulting in tragic circumstances.

What was once hailed as a simplified, holistic and supportive social security reform has become nothing more than a vehicle for cuts. The political choice of austerity has taken more than £37 billion from the welfare state, while giving more than £110 billion of tax cuts to the wealthiest individuals and rich corporations. While the Chancellor looks around and claims to be blind to the poverty that many of us witnessed as we walked into Westminster this morning, the record 1.6 million emergency food parcels that were given out last year alone and the 4.1 million children who are in poverty tell a different story—one that should shame every single one of us in this House.

Riverside, a major social housing provider nationally and in my constituency, has provided me with a case study that illustrates the systemic failure of universal credit on the frontline. The couple involved, who do not wish to give their names because of the sensitive circumstances, said:

“Me and my partner have had so much Universal Credit taken off us, that we are struggling to get gas, electric and food, on a monthly basis, we have tried weekly and that was even worse, the money that we are on makes having a home difficult…so we are having to visit the food bank more regularly.”

That is just one among many cases that have been highlighted in this Chamber today. The changes and cuts to the local housing allowance have helped to drive rent arrears up to alarming levels. According to Shelter, two in five renters in the private sector are having to borrow money. Minister, that needs to change.

It would be easy for the Government to try to dismiss such cases and statistics as cherry-picking from Opposition MPs; in fact, a previous Secretary of State referred to them as “fake news”. But what about the findings of the United Nations rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights, who last month published his third and perhaps most damning view of the Government’s welfare policies, stating that our country’s poorest residents face lives that are “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short”? What about the independent End Child Poverty coalition’s finding that child poverty is the “new normal” in some of the most deprived parts of Britain, with half a million more children living in poverty now than in 2010?

The Trussell Trust has found that when universal credit goes live in an area, food bank demand increases by a massive 52%. The trust’s figures show that a fifth of all referrals to food banks last year were linked to delays in receiving benefits, almost half of which related directly to universal credit. The Minister will claim that advance payments are available to universal credit claimants, so
no one should go hungry for lack of cash. However, it has rightly been pointed out in this debate that those are loans that have to be paid back, which means debt on top of debt for the 60% of claimants who are forced down that route.

The five-week delay in payments must end. The system must be reformed. Will the Minister listen to the plethora of organisations that hon. Members have cited today, such as Shelter, Mind, the Child Poverty Action Group and the Riverside housing association? The monthly payments design of universal credit does not reflect the reality of many people’s lives or how they manage their money. A Resolution Foundation study found that most people moving from employment were paid either fortnightly or weekly in their previous job. The research highlighted the fact that people who claim universal credit are often not made aware of alternative payment arrangements to help people who are struggling to manage their own money, and do not always receive them when they apply.

In January, the Secretary of State announced her intention to improve the provision of alternative payment arrangements, make it easier for private renters to have payments made directly to landlords, and test ways to make more frequent payments to more people who struggle with monthly budgeting. Will the Minister tell us what progress has been made on that?

As we have heard today, it is not just advance payments that can lead to deductions from universal credit, but other bills too. Indeed, up to 40% of the universal credit monthly standard allowance can currently be deducted for repayment of advances, utility bill debts and rent and council tax arrears. More than half of universal credit claimants have a deduction; as my hon. Friend the Member for High Peak (Ruth George) pointed out, that is 844,000 people. What assessment has the Minister made of the impact of debt repayments on levels of hardship among universal credit claimants?

According to Citizens Advice, a single person over 25 who claims universal credit can see £127 deducted from their benefits every month to repay existing debts. If the Government are determined to help people to manage their debts, why is their own Department making deductions that often push claimants into hardship?

Mr Sweeney: My hon. Friend makes an incredibly important point. In a recent roving surgery, I visited a constituent who was suffering so much with mental health problems that he was unable even to face opening the letters that he received. He therefore did not receive the information about his situation and was subject to severe sanctions and deductions. He could have challenged them because of his situation, but the DWP was unable even to engage with him to assess the risk that he faced. As a result, he was suicidal. It is absolutely shocking what is going on.

Mike Amesbury: My hon. Friend makes a very powerful contribution that shows the need for more compassion and flexibility in the system. It is clear from the evidence and from this debate that initial decisions to apply deductions follow rigid rules and rates and do not include an affordability test. Will the Minister introduce an affordability test for deductions, particularly multiple deductions, to ensure that nobody is pushed into poverty or destitution?

The Government’s stock response to criticism of their welfare policies is to deny that there is even a problem, but their talk of a jobs miracle is nothing more than a mirage to many people who struggle on zero-hours contracts or in low-paid and part-time employment, with wages not even at 2008 levels. The same attitude is on display again in the new “Universal credit uncovered” propaganda campaign, with newspaper ads—seemingly designed to look like journalism—that aim to explode what are perceived to be media myths about universal credit and set the record straight, as my hon. Friend the Member for Easington (Grahame Morris) pointed out. It is perhaps telling that one charity has already reported the campaign to the Advertising Standards Authority. As we have heard today, these are not myths. They are facts, which illustrate a social security system that is failing—a system hollowed out by cruel cuts.

In conclusion, I call on the Minister to halt managed migration in its entirety, end the five-week wait, stop punitive sanctions, introduce split payments, restore the local housing allowance to at least the bottom 30th percentile, pay 85% of childcare support up front, stop the benefits freeze and the immoral two-child limit, and properly fund a compassionate social security system.

4 pm

The Minister for Employment (Alok Sharma): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Gray, in this very important debate secured by the hon. Member for High Peak (Ruth George). Whatever our political differences, I am happy to acknowledge that she and indeed all the hon. Members who have spoken care very deeply about their constituents. I want to be clear that I want to ensure that every single person who is claiming universal credit gets the support that they absolutely deserve.

Let me start by setting out where we are with universal credit. Last year, universal credit completed its roll-out to all jobcentres across the country. We now have just under 2 million people claiming this benefit, and all new entrants to the benefits system now claim universal credit.

I entirely agree that we must ensure that we provide support through the welfare system to the most vulnerable. I am pleased that colleagues from all parties, including the hon. Member for High Peak, have acknowledged that changes have been made. My hon. Friend the Members for Waveney (Peter Aldous), and for Gloucester (Richard Graham), talked about the fabulous work being done by work coaches in our jobcentres.

As colleagues will know, in the last two Budgets, we announced changes to universal credit worth an additional £6 billion. I do not like to introduce rancour into this type of debate, and I am always open to discussion, but I gently point out that on those occasions, Opposition Members did not vote to support that extra money going into the system.

In the 2017 Budget, we announced a two-week run-on for those on housing benefit, the removal of the seven-day waiting period, and the ability for a claimant to get up to 100% of their estimated first-period payment as an advance, on the same day if needed. In last year’s Budget, among other measures, we announced increases to work allowances worth £1.7 billion a year. Colleagues touched on the additional run-on; from July 2020, there...
will be a two-week run-on of Department for Work and Pensions out-of-work legacy benefits for existing claimants who are being moved on to universal credit.

Neil Gray: The Minister lists the changes that have been made of late; does he acknowledge that none of them make up for the cuts made in the 2015 Budget?

Alok Sharma: The hon. Gentleman will know that we inherited dire financial circumstances from the Opposition—I know that colleagues will not be happy at my mentioning that—and that is why we had to make difficult decisions. However, if Labour Members want more money introduced, then when that money is made available in Budgets, they should support those Budgets.

I will go back to the point about payments, including advance payments. I highlight that advances are interest-free.

Debbie Abrahams: Oh!

Alok Sharma: I am sorry that the hon. Lady is unhappy, but that is a statement of fact.

Debbie Abrahams: They are still loans.

James Gray (in the Chair): Order.

Alok Sharma: Also, individuals will receive that money as an advance to their universal credit payment, so they will receive 13 payments over a 12-month period. I make it absolutely clear once again that, as I hope colleagues will acknowledge, these are interest-free advances. Of course, from October this year, the Government will reduce the maximum rate—

Chris Stephens: Will the Minister give way?

Alok Sharma: I will not, as there is quite a lot to get through.

From this October, the Government will reduce the maximum rate at which deductions can be made from a universal credit award from 40% to 30% of the standard allowance. By the end of 2019-20, it is forecast that around 290,000 universal credit households will have had deductions reduced, by an average of £295 over the year. It is already possible to extend the period over which advances are repaid to 15 months in certain circumstances, and of course, as Members have acknowledged, from October 2021, the maximum period will be extended to 16 months for all claimants.

One issue not touched on in the debate was payment timeliness, but it is worth pointing out that it has been raised in previous debates, certainly during my time as a Minister. Payment timeliness has improved significantly. We now pay around 85% of new claimants of universal credit in full on time. In addition, 95% of claimants are paid in full within five weeks of their payment due date.

If there are delays in making the first payment, that can be due to outstanding verification issues, such as the need to provide bank statements or proof of rent. It can also be due to a claimant not signing their claimant commitment. For ongoing claims, payment timeliness is around 98%.

The shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Weaver Vale (Mike Amesbury), raised the issue of employment. The whole point of simplifying the welfare system is to remove the cliff edges and the disincentives to take on work and extra hours that existed under the legacy benefit system. We now offer claimants one-to-one support to help them to move into work.

I hope that colleagues will acknowledge that we are seeing record rates of employment, month after month. The shadow Minister talked about zero-hours contracts, but he will know that less than 3% of people in employment in the UK are on zero-hours contracts. That figure has fallen this year. Indeed, those on zero-hours contracts are doing about 24 hours of work a week on average.

We have recognised that we need to provide a consistently high level of support to those who may have difficulties in making a universal credit claim. That is why we announced our partnership with Citizens Advice and Citizens Advice Scotland, which are now funded to provide the “help to claim” service for claimants.

In the past, a number of colleagues have spoken about debt advice. They will know that debt advice is now fully funded by the financial services levy, and that service delivery is commissioned by the Money and Pensions Service, which was launched in January this year. In 2019-20, MaPS will provide around 560,000 sessions of debt advice in England. It is also worth noting that in addition to the funding that Citizens Advice receives for the “help to claim” service, it will, like other organisations, receive additional funding from MaPS to provide debt advice.

A number of colleagues raised the issue of rent arrears. I point out that a report published in July 2018 by the National Federation of ALMOs, or arms-length management organisations, showed that over three quarters of their tenants who had started claiming universal credit were already behind with their rent prior to commencing their claim. Also, research that we have carried out shows that the proportion of universal credit claimants who were in arrears at the start of their claim fell by a third after four months. In the universal credit full service claimant survey, which was published by the DWP in June 2018, 84% of claimants said that they felt confident about managing and paying their housing costs.

My hon. Friend the Member for Gloucester raised the issue of rent arrears and asked what further work we were doing on it. I can confirm that we are carrying out further analysis with a number of housing providers to investigate and understand the true level of rent arrears among their tenants, and what is causing those arrears. Of course, when we have that information, we will publish it.

A number of colleagues raised the issue of tax credit debt. Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs already seeks to recover overpayments of tax credit debts. When a claimant moves on to universal credit, any outstanding debt is transferred to the DWP for recovery. This does not include debt that is subject to ongoing disputes or appeals, and HMRC tells the claimant the amount of debt that is being transferred to the DWP for recovery. HMRC and the DWP continue to work closely to improve the claimant journey. This includes having a joint inquiry team to handle any issues that tax credit customers might experience during their move to universal
credit. Of course, if claimants are struggling with the rate of repayment applied, they can ask the Department to review that rate.

A large number of points were made during the debate, so I say to hon. Members that if they want to meet me separately to discuss any points in more detail, I am very happy to do that, or they can write to me. However, in the remaining couple of minutes that I have, I will try to cover off some of the points made in the debate.

On the discussion about poverty, I point out that income inequality and absolute poverty are lower now than in 2010, and indeed the number of children—

Debbie Abrahams: Will the Minister give way?

Alok Sharma: I will not, because I literally have just a couple of minutes left. As I was saying, the number of children in workless households in the UK is down by 665,000 since 2010.

There was a discussion about homelessness. Since 2011, the Government have provided local authorities with about £1 billion in discretionary housing payments to protect the most vulnerable claimants. The hon. Member for High Peak raised the issue of how people know what deductions are being applied to them; that is shown in their statement, separately from the journal, and is available online. She also raised a point about deductions. I point out that if a claimant is subject to deductions to repay an overpayment, and those deductions are causing financial hardship, they can request a review of that rate by contacting the Department. Claimants have had their repayment rate lowered, temporarily suspended, or indeed both.

A number of colleagues also asked why we were not able to bring forward the 30% deduction rate on the standard allowance. The delivery date was chosen to achieve the best balance between continually improving universal credit in order to respond to claimant needs, and ensuring that the service is technically and operationally scalable as the volume of universal credit continues to rise. The hon. Member for Makerfield (Yvonne Fovargue) raised an issue about the breathing space scheme; the Department is supportive of that scheme, and officials are reviewing it to see how it could be applied to DWP debts. I would be very happy to sit down and talk with her further when more information is available.

A number of colleagues, including the shadow Minister, raised the issue of the Metro campaign. The whole point of the “Universal Credit Uncovered” campaign is to tackle common myths about universal credit. The Department has consulted the Advertising Standards Authority, and our adverts reflect its advice. To those Members who talked about the amount of money being spent on this campaign, I advise them that it is certainly not £23 million.

The issue of split payments was raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Waveney; as he knows, those are already available. The hon. Member for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey (Drew Hendry) raised the issue of Highland Council. He and I have met a number of times about this issue, and as he will know, my officials continue to engage with Highland Council about that point. Finally, the Scottish Government have themselves cut funding for Highland Council.

In conclusion, we are making changes that are benefiting claimants, but I am always happy to talk to colleagues about how we can do better.

Ruth George: I called on the Minister to bring forward some of the changes. I do not know whether he understood the waffle that his Department gave him to explain why that will not happen, but I would be very grateful to hear his proper explanation for it.

I thank everyone who has contributed, and the organisations for all their research and briefing. To anyone who is watching who is suffering under universal credit and the deductions that are being made, I say this: get advice, challenge those deductions, and come and see your MP about them. Let us get them sorted.

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 10 (6)).
Authorised Absence from School

James Gray (in the Chair): Would Members leave the Chamber as quickly and quietly as they can, avoiding private conversations if at all possible? The level of interest in the absence from school debate is proved by the absence of Members from the Chamber.

4.13 pm

Steve Double (St Austell and Newquay) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered authorised absence from school.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Gray.

I have raised this issue with the Minister many times, both in debates and directly. I have campaigned for the Government to review and change their policy for some time. I remain of the view that it is not the role of the state to dictate to parents what is right and best for their children; that should be decided in partnership between parents and the school. I wanted to raise the issue again today in the light of a number of recent developments and cases that have been brought to me, both by constituents and by parents elsewhere in the country.

Part of the problem is that although the Government say that absence from school should be authorised by headteachers only in exceptional circumstances, they do not provide clear guidance as to what constitutes an exceptional circumstance. That has led to a degree of confusion and complicated situations, as was highlighted recently by the climate change protests, during which thousands of schoolchildren took time away from school to attend the demonstrations. I am reliably informed—it has been reported—that many of those children were given authorised absence to miss classroom time in order to attend those protests. Leaving aside the point that I do not see how something can be called a strike when people have been given permission to be absent, parents should be able to expect some consistency in the application of the policy.

I do not have a problem with children missing time from the classroom to attend those demonstrations. Education is about far more than what takes place in our classrooms, and attending such events broadens children’s experiences and knowledge and gives them a wider view of the world, so it is incredibly beneficial to our classrooms, and attending such events broadens education is about far more than what takes place in

Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): I am pleased that the hon. Gentleman has secured this debate on an extremely important subject. At Timothy Hackworth School in my constituency, there are real worries that if it falls below 96% attendance, because a contagious disease or another perfectly valid reason pushes the number of absences up, Ofsted will mark it down. Will the Minister address the question of whether Ofsted is so inflexible that every school has to achieve 96%, irrespective of circumstance?

Steve Double: I am grateful for that intervention. I will probably elaborate further on the hon. Lady’s point, but she is absolutely right that the drive to attain an attendance level above everything else, with no recognition of the welfare of the children involved, seems to be overriding common sense. One headteacher told me recently in a meeting, “If our school was outstanding in every other respect, but we fell short of the attendance target, we would deemed as ‘requires improvement’ simply for missing the attendance target.” That situation seems bonkers to me. Rather than looking at the wider picture of what is right and best for our children, schools are being driven by the Ofsted inspection regime to focus on an attendance target above all else. I will cite a few examples showing how that has been detrimental to the wellbeing and welfare of children and families in our communities.

We now have a situation where parents who for perfectly legitimate reasons are unable to take a family holiday during the school holiday period are basically subject to an arbitrary tax imposed by the local authority for taking their children out of school. Is the Minister’s Department aware of how local authorities are spending that money? As far as I can see, literally tens of thousands of pounds is being collected by local authorities through these fines, yet no one seems to know how that money is spent. It would be reasonable for parents to know how the extra tax they are paying is being spent.
For many families, the fines are no deterrent, because they are less than the money they save by taking their children on holiday during term time. If having a cheaper holiday is their motivation, facing a fine is not a deterrent. What it does do is penalise the poorest families in our society. It is a regressive tax. In my constituency, many simply cannot afford a holiday in peak season. We are saying to those poorer families, “Because you cannot afford it, you cannot have a holiday unless you face this additional fine.” It is a regressive situation.

Additionally, the fine hits small business owners the hardest. I have many small business owners in my constituency, particularly in the tourism industry, who are simply unable to take time away from their business during the peak season. That is where they make their money. They are faced with either taking their children on holiday out of peak season when business is quieter and they can afford to have a week away, or not having a family holiday. I say respectfully to the Minister that any policy that hits the entrepreneurs and small business owners of our country in particular should have no place under a Conservative Government. We are targeting the very people we say we stand up for.

A key point that I want to make is that the policy is clearly incredibly unpopular with parents. I am grateful to the parliamentary digital engagement team, which put out some public engagement on social media ahead of the debate. We have seen literally tens of thousands of responses. Mumsnet posted it, and it was the post of the debate. We have seen literally tens of thousands of responses. Mumsnet posted it, and it was the post that attracted the most attention in the whole month of May.

Many parents clearly feel strongly about the policy, but my key point is that it damages the relationship between parents—the family—and the school. It pits one against the other. I was a school governor for 19 years. Sadly, I had to step away from that when I was elected to the House, as I simply did not have time to do it any longer, but I know from that time that at the heart of good education is a partnership between the home and the school. We have got to get away from the concept that education takes place only in the classroom. Education is about the whole of life, and parents have a crucial and central role to play in any child’s education. When that works well, it works in partnership with the school.

Time and again, I have seen this policy break that constructive and positive relationship between parents and the school. Constituents have told me that, because the school refused to give them authorised leave and they were then fined, they refuse to fundraise for the school or volunteer to support it. The policy is counterproductive. We should be encouraging positive relationships between parents and schools, but our policy is damaging that relationship. Whatever gains the Department for Education may feel it is making in education by getting children to be in the classroom more often, I would suggest we are losing out from the loss of good will between parents and the school, and the breakdown of that positive relationship.

**Helen Goodman:** Perhaps I can trespass for another couple of seconds on the hon. Gentleman to say that he is absolutely right. Furthermore, we see rising mental health problems among children and young people, and this kind of stress is exactly what families do not need.

**Steve Double:** I think the hon. Lady has read my notes; I am slightly worried. The next point I wanted to raise was that one of the unintended consequences—I do not believe anyone in the ministerial team or the Department for Education intends it—is the impact the policy is having on some of the most vulnerable children, including those with special needs and particularly those with mental health challenges. Several parents from my constituency have come to see me because they are at their wits’ end. Their children have severe mental health challenges, yet the school will not authorise them to miss any time off school, when they are not able to attend school regularly because of the mental health challenges they face.

In one case the school said, “We will not authorise your leave until you have a diagnosis for your child.” but we all know that it takes months and months to get a mental health diagnosis for young people. Parents are getting warning letters from the school because their child is missing school, even though it knows that the child has mental health conditions. All that does is aggravate the issue for the child and the parents.

The way the policy is being driven by Ofsted and some of our schools is incredibly detrimental to the wellbeing of some of the most vulnerable children in our communities. I therefore believe that we need to take a serious, long look at the policy. The policy is putting schools and headteachers in an impossible situation. The drive to raise attendance levels above all else is having an incredibly detrimental impact on some families and children.

Part of the problem—this was alluded to earlier by the hon. Lady—is that there is a sense of buck-passing. The DFE says that heads have discretion to exercise their judgment on what is an exceptional circumstance, but headteachers tell me that when they exercise that discretion—correctly, they believe—if the attendance level drops, they are criticised and marked down by Ofsted. When I meet Ofsted staff and challenge them, they tell me that they are only doing what they are instructed to do by the DFE.

There seems to be a vicious circle that no one can break out of. We need to be clear about whether headteachers have discretion to exercise their judgment. If they do, they need to be allowed to do so and not be criticised by Ofsted. If taking discretion away from headteachers is a clear policy being driven from the centre, let us be honest about that so that the headteachers are not put in an impossible situation.

Before winding up, I want to mention the impact on the holiday market and holiday businesses. Many firms get criticised for raising their prices during the peak holiday season, which is basically the school holidays, but the reality is—I have literally hundreds of such businesses in my constituency—that that is now the only time of the year in which they get to make money. Parents are prevented from bringing their children outside the holiday season, so all that demand gets condensed into six or seven weeks in the summer season, and that is when those businesses have to make their money. We cannot blame them. If the demand is there, and they need to make their money in those few short weeks, clearly prices will go up. However, we are exacerbating the issue through this policy. By making the demand so condensed in those few weeks, we are making holidays
even more unaffordable for many families, so they have to choose to take their holiday at another time. It is another case of the policy being counterproductive.

I have many examples. When word went out that I had secured this debate, literally thousands of people across the country contacted me with examples of how the policy is negatively affecting their family and children. I do not have time to read many of them, but there are many cases of families struggling to live with the consequences of the policy.

I do not think that the policy is working, and we are not achieving what we actually want to, which is better outcomes for children. We have to take a wider view and understand that education is about more than the classroom. The policy is counterproductive, because it damages the vital, constructive, positive relationship between families and schools, and it hits some of the most vulnerable in our society. Once again, I put it to the Minister that we really need to review the policy and consider a better way of applying the right sort of expectations on parents with regard to having their children in school regularly. We must ensure that we are not damaging children and families as a result of the policy, and look at whether there is a better way of doing this.

4.31 pm

The Minister for School Standards (Nick Gibb): It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship again, Mr Gray. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for St Austell and Newquay (Steve Double) on securing the debate. I know that this subject is of close interest to him. As he mentioned, it is one that we have debated on a number of occasions over the years.

We can all agree that children’s education should not be disrupted by preventable absences. Regular attendance at school is fundamental to ensuring that every pupil, no matter their background, can meet their full potential. It is about social mobility. That is why I welcome this opportunity to reiterate the Government’s commitment to improving school attendance and ensuring that schools tackle all forms of absence as part of our ambition to create a world-class education system. I will set out the Government’s overall policy on reducing school absence before turning to the issue of term-time holidays.

There is a correlation between time absent from school and attainment. Pupils with higher overall absence tend to do less well in their GCSEs, even after taking their prior attainment and some other characteristics into account, as set out in the report by the Department for Education, “Absence and attainment at key stages 2 and 4: 2013 to 2014”. A pupil who has been absent is also liable to interrupt the education of other pupils and to increase the workload on teachers, as schools seek to ensure that an absent pupil catches up with the work that he or she has missed.

The Government have made the rules clear: no child should be absent from school unless the circumstances are genuinely exceptional.

The persistent absence threshold was changed from 15% to 10% in September 2015 to encourage schools to act earlier in dealing with patterns of poor attendance. Persistent absence from school remains a society-wide challenge. We recognise the need for further action in this area, following a small but consistent increase in the number of pupils missing 10% or more of sessions in recent years; that figure is up from 10.8% in 2016-17 to 11.2% in 2017-18.

In 2013, we also clarified the law to address the widespread misconception that parents were entitled to take their children on holiday during term time. No such entitlement has ever existed in law. In clarifying the law, the Government ensured that headteachers retained the discretion to authorise a leave of absence when they were confident that the request constituted an exceptional circumstance. The Department has not specified to schools what constitutes exceptional circumstances. Schools know their pupils better than the Department, and can consider the specific details and relevant context behind each request for a leave of absence.

My hon. Friend will agree that what constitutes exceptional circumstances will differ enormously depending on individual and local circumstances. That is why it would not be appropriate for the Government to dictate what exceptional circumstances would warrant authorised absence across the country. We are clear that children should not be absent from school unless the circumstances are genuinely exceptional.

I agree with my hon. Friend that a positive and constructive relationship between parents and schools is essential. That is why we encourage parents to talk to their child’s school to make their case when they require a leave of absence. If parents wish to take their child out of school, the onus is on them to apply to the school in advance for a leave of absence, demonstrating in their application why they believe that there are exceptional circumstances.

I disagree with my hon. Friend that the Department’s attendance policy is counterproductive. Despite a very small increase in overall absence from 4.7% in 2016-17 to 4.8% in 2017-18, overall absence has fallen significantly from 6% in 2009-10. Parents have a duty, under section 7 of the Education Act 1996, to ensure that their child is of compulsory school age—five to 16—he or she receives an “efficient full-time education...either by attendance at school or otherwise”.

We have ensured that schools and local authorities have a range of measures to support or sanction parents when their child’s absence from school becomes a problem. The law gives schools and local authorities powers to offer parenting contracts and obtain parenting orders in relation to attendance. The law is clear that if parents register their child at a school and the child fails to attend regularly, parents may be guilty of an offence under section 444 of the 1996 Act, and may be given a penalty notice unless statutory exceptions apply, including where leave has been granted by the headteacher.

The penalty notice offers parents the opportunity to avoid any conviction for the offence, if the penalty is paid in full and within the timescales. Prosecution of a parent is available to local authorities as the ultimate sanction under section 444 of the 1996 Act. Penalties are therefore a way of avoiding prosecution, although of course local authorities can go straight for a prosecution.
Since we last debated the issue, the Supreme Court has clarified that regular attendance in section 444(1) of the 1996 Act means attendance “in accordance with attendance rules”.

The Court also recognised the disruptive effect of taking a child out of school during term time, both on the child and on the work and study of the other children at the school and in the class.

Turning to my hon. Friend’s point about term-time holidays, the Government recognise the value of family holidays in providing enriching experiences that can indeed have educational value. However, the school year is designed to give families the opportunity to enjoy breaks and holidays without disrupting their children’s education. Schools are in session for 190 out of 365 days, leaving 175 days in a year on which parents can take their children away on holiday. I recognise that the cost of holidays is a frustration for parents, and the Secretary of State and I encourage travel operators to do what they can to provide value for money to families.

The Government do not set term and holiday dates. Decisions around term dates are best taken locally, especially where the local industry—for example, tourism—creates a compelling reason to set term dates that differ from those of the rest of the country. Local authorities are responsible for setting term dates for community schools, community special schools, and voluntary-controlled schools.

Variation in school holiday dates between local authorities already exists. That was seen over the recent Easter holidays. Sheffield City Council, for example, has a fixed Easter break at the beginning of April, which this year fell outside the official Easter peak. Similarly, in 2017, Nottinghamshire County Council took the decision to shorten its summer break and extend its October half term to two weeks, following consultation with parents.

All academies and free schools, which account for about 36% of state-funded schools, have responsibility for setting their term and holiday dates. Other schools, where the governing body is the employer of staff, such as foundation or voluntary-aided schools, also have that power, which some have already used to adapt their term dates to suit the needs of their pupils and local areas. That is an important freedom that the Government have encouraged schools to use. If parents and schools want different term dates, so they can take their children on holidays outside the more expensive peak holiday season, they should discuss that with their local authority, or with their child’s school, if it is a foundation, voluntary-aided school or academy.

Helen Goodman: Will the Minister address the question of whether Ofsted is failing schools if attendance is below 96%? If 96% is the wrong number, will he tell us the right one?

Nick Gibb: I am about to come on to Ofsted, which was also raised by my hon. Friend the Member for St Austell and Newquay, and its role in influencing schools’ decisions.

Ofsted’s inspection framework makes it clear that it will consider an up-to-date attendance analysis for all groups of pupils. Inspectors will make a judgment about the behaviour and attitudes in a school. The inspection framework specifies that in doing so, they will look for a strong focus on attendance and punctuality, so that disruption is minimised. They will expect to see clear and effective behaviour and attendance policies, with clearly defined consequences that are applied consistently and fairly by all staff. They will also consider how well the school meets the needs of all pupils, including those with special educational needs and disabilities, and pupils’ spiritual, moral, social and cultural development.

I am grateful to my hon. Friend and other hon. Members for highlighting the issues around school attendance. To answer my hon. Friend’s question about how the money is spent, the requirement is for it to be reinvested in the attendance system in the local area. The system is intended to be cost-neutral. Many areas spend it on supporting projects to improve school attendance locally.1

The Government take the issue seriously and have put in place a number of measures to prioritise and incentivise school attendance. We will continue to monitor progress and encourage schools and local authorities to use their powers to stagger term dates where appropriate.

Question put and agreed to.

1[Official Report, 10 June 2019, Vol. 661, c. 3MC.]
Crime and Antisocial Behaviour: Small Towns

4.42 pm

Tracy Brabin (Batley and Spen) (Lab/Co-op): I beg to move,

That this House has considered rising crime and antisocial behaviour in smaller towns and communities.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Gray, and I thank hon. Members for coming to this important debate. I am grateful to have the opportunity to hold the debate, because crime is one of the most important issues that my constituents face.

My constituency is a collection of small towns and villages perched just outside Leeds in West Yorkshire. As such, we fall under the responsibility of West Yorkshire police, which covers an enormous area—more than 2,000 sq km—that is home to upwards of 2 million people. Its jurisdiction includes the big cities of Leeds and Bradford and the large towns of Wakefield and Huddersfield. With those big bustling urban centres, it can often feel like a competition for the smaller places that I represent, such as Batley, Birstall, Liversedge, Gomersal, Heckmondwike and Cleckheaton, to get the attention they deserve.

There is a perception that the serious crime happens in big cities, but that could not be further from the truth, which is why this debate focuses specifically on towns and smaller communities. I will use examples from my constituency to demonstrate my concerns. Before that, however, it is important to put the cuts that have been forced on West Yorkshire police on the record. Since 2010, it has lost £140 million in central Government funding and more than 1,000 officers.

Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): My hon. Friend and constituency neighbour is making an excellent speech. Does she agree that it is often the low-level antisocial behaviour that is an absolute blight on neighbourhoods? The police have so many competing demands, largely because of the reduction in their numbers, that it is difficult for them to respond to everything that they might like to.

Tracy Brabin: I thank my hon. Friend for highlighting antisocial behaviour, which I will come to. The cuts certainly have an impact on our streets.

The funding cuts to West Yorkshire police would be worse were it not for the action of the Labour police and crime commissioner, Mark Burns-Williamson, who raised the police funding element of council tax to stem the loss of officers and restart recruitment in the face of cuts to the central grant. I am not a spokesperson for the police, and, let us be honest, many people in my constituency are frustrated with police services, but it is important to acknowledge the context of what they have faced in recent years, because it has an impact on their ability to respond to and deter crime.

Vytjie Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): As a fellow West Yorkshire MP, I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing the debate. I strongly agree that West Yorkshire police has faced major cuts, which are hitting our towns. Does she agree that towns have often been particularly heavily hit by austerity, because overstretched police forces have been forced to concentrate many of their resources in the bigger cities? In Knottingley, there have been recent reports and challenges regarding antisocial behaviour, and in Normanton, there have been attacks on shopkeepers in the town centre. We need neighbourhood police officers in our towns, as well as the crime prevention work, to keep people safe.

Tracy Brabin: My right hon. Friend makes a fantastic point. We need the community presence, as well as the intelligence that comes from relationships with communities. That can stem the flow of antisocial behaviour, because the police know where it is coming from and because they know the families.

Ian C. Lucas (Wrexham) (Lab): It is also important to appreciate that police community support officers—an excellent Labour initiative that contributed to neighbourhood policing while Labour was in power—have faced reductions too. The decline in their number is important, and the reduction in Wrexham town centre is having a noticeable impact on antisocial behaviour.

Tracy Brabin: That is an excellent point. I pay tribute to those officers who are increasingly asked to go beyond the call of duty and attend what are sometimes quite violent situations that they may not have the resources at hand to deal with.

It is not an exaggeration to say that there is a crime epidemic in my constituency, which my constituents are sick to the back teeth of. I, too, am completely fed up and exhausted from hearing from constituents who are at their wits’ end and frightened to leave home after dark because of the menace of nuisance bikes and mopeds.

Graham P. Jones (Hyndburn) (Lab): It is commendable that my hon. Friend has brought this debate to Westminster Hall. I also commend my right hon. Friend the Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper) for her work on towns. Like many hon. Members, I have two towns in my constituency. People feel not just a sense of loss, but fear and worry when there is no visible police station. Great Harwood and Haslingden in my constituency have lost their police stations, for the reason that my right hon. Friend stated—the cuts take place in the small towns—and criminals can see that there is an opportunity to commit crime, so people live in fear.

Tracy Brabin: I thank my hon. Friend for that comment. Certainly, in Batley, the police station has gone up for sale. It is disconcerting for communities when they see that “For sale” sign appear. People wonder, “If I was in a crisis, how long would it take for the police to arrive?”

To return to nuisance bikes and mopeds, the problem goes beyond antisocial behaviour; it is extremely dangerous, not just for the bike owners, but for other road users and pedestrians. The bikes keep people awake at night, which has a serious impact on health, wellbeing, stress and anxiety. It is also a difficult crime to clamp down on, as the perpetrators are on fast-moving vehicles, and most bikes are being used illegally, so simply taking them off the streets is a time-limited hindrance rather than a solution. Equally, we do not necessarily want high-speed chases to happen in built-up areas and little villages.
I am pleased to say, however, that West Yorkshire police and Kirklees Council, working with me, have been able to provide protective equipment for a couple of police motorcycle riders, so that officers can be trained to safely catch those who cause havoc. We know that we need a proper, nationwide response to tackle this problem, rather than piecemeal solutions when an MP gets concerned about something. We know it is going to involve the police, along with schools, youth services and local authority outreach teams. Sadly, those are all things that the Conservatives seem to have no problem cutting.

Let me turn to burglaries. What is happening in my constituency is truly shocking. When I visit the shopping centres in my towns and villages, the frequency of burglaries never fails to shock me. The towns of Batley and Birstall have been particularly badly hit. Burglaries affected almost every shop in Birstall town centre, one after the other. What is most frustrating is that in many cases the crime seems completely brainless—money is not kept on-site and items of high value have been removed. The criminals break in, wreak havoc and usually leave empty-handed. In some cases, they take the charity box. There was a break-in at the Chevalia café in Batley. The charity box was taken, and the café reached out on Facebook and said that that person must be very hungry or struggling financially, and that if they contacted the café, it would give them a week’s free food and perhaps support them financially. The shop owners should not have to do this to try to solve a problem that is not necessarily of their making. It is almost as if causing damage is for its own sake.

Last Saturday was Small Business Saturday, and I was really taken aback when visiting business owners. One said they were seriously considering leaving their door open, having been a victim of so many break-ins on numerous occasions, given that it is almost cheaper to leave the door open than have it repaired every time they are broken into. I could go on highlighting such cases, but we need solutions. Town centres are struggling enough; they should not have to contend with repeated break-ins.

The reality in smaller towns is that there usually will not be a police car round the corner during late evenings and through the night, and response officers are prioritising urgent cases such as domestic abuse or violence. So what can we do? Can the Minister tell us whether the Government have given consideration to crime prevention measures as part of plans to support high streets? Perhaps central funding could be made available for co-ordinated alarm systems or even high-quality CCTV, which can be too expensive for smaller shops acting on their own. If criminals are to be caught and prosecuted, surely that is the greatest deterrent possible.

I have used a number of case studies, but Members should be in no doubt that the figures more than back them up. I will come to that shortly.

Tracy Brabin: That is a very well-made point. By working with Safer Kirklees and Kirklees Neighbourhood Housing, we can have a joined-up effect on the most persistent burglars and try to get them out of those areas. Our communities do not want such behaviour. However, when we move people on, they can always stay with friends or on people’s sofas. It is important to ensure they are restricted in their opportunities for criminality, so my right hon. Friend makes a very good point.

I now turn to one of my deepest concerns: violent crime. We have seen an escalation in violent crime in our towns and villages. I recently went to our local pub in Cleckheaton, where a couple had been attacked violently with an axe while the pub was open. Although traumatised, the staff, landlord and landlady have been very brave in continuing to open their pub, and they have been overwhelmed by the community response to support them. A pensioner was also brutally attacked on a popular walkway by a gang of youths. A serving soldier was mowed down while celebrating the new year—luckily, the perpetrator is now behind bars. Guns are being discharged far too often in our community.

West Yorkshire police have recently been judged outstanding for reporting crime, for which I celebrate them. Their website breaks down the figures by parliamentary constituency, and I am afraid that it does not make for happy reading. Between April 2018 and March 2019, 2,686 incidents of antisocial behaviour were reported in Batley and Spen. There were 2,700 incidents of burglary, criminal damage or arson. More disturbingly, there have been almost 4,500 reported incidents of violence and sexual offences. Not a month has gone by when fewer than 1,000 crimes have been reported. This is a constituency of just over 100,000 people. Those numbers are shocking and wrong, and we deserve better. For each of the examples I have given, there are literally hundreds of other cases that people felt too demoralised or jaded even to report. We simply must stop crime continuing to rise.

Batley and Spen sounds a bit like the wild west, but it is a wonderful place to live and work. We cannot allow our lives to be blighted by the minority.

Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing the debate. Does she think that, at the very heart of this, the concern of people in constituencies such as Batley and Spen and Great Grimsby is that quality of life is severely affected as a result of crime, be it violent crime, which has increased in my constituency, or the antisocial behaviour that she has been discussing?

Tracy Brabin: I absolutely agree. In comparison with cities, the quality of life in some towns is being diminished because services are going out to cities—infrastructure and so on. We should not have to put up with the increase in violent crime and antisocial behaviour in nice backwaters; we should have a proper quality of life and choose to live in communities such as ours because they are safer, the quality of life is better and they are great places to bring up children.

We have to be frank: the rise in crime is not just about a couple of bad apples, a family or a gang of kids. The Conservatives used to be the party of law and order—they used to pride themselves on it—but they have done their...
absolute best since 2010 to destroy that reputation. Police-recorded violent crime has more than doubled since 2010. Knife crime is at its highest on record. Arrests—the currency of deterrence—have halved in a decade, and the number of unsolved crimes stands at an unthinkable 2 million cases. Nine years of austerity has led to 20,000 fewer officers on our streets. The National Audit Office estimates that police funding fell by 19% between 2010-11 and 2018-19, and direct Government funding fell by a staggering 30% over the same period.

Police are not the only force for resolving, and preferably deterring, crime—no hon. Members present would argue that they are. However, they provide a vital service. When the police are seen on the streets less or take longer to respond, or when a crime goes unsolved, trust is diminished and fear creeps in.

Ruth George (High Peak) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making an excellent case about her constituency, which is very similar to mine—a rural area with lots of towns and where crime is rising. Our police have almost halved in number. Our police stations have been shutting, our magistrates court has shut, and now our custody suite is shutting as well. Police officers will have to travel almost an hour to take people who have been arrested into custody. Does she agree that those cuts, and austerity more widely, lead directly to the rise in crime?

Tracy Brabin: I absolutely agree. My hon. Friend makes a powerful point about the reduction of police officers on the streets. If an officer has to travel further with a prisoner, they will be tied up for longer and less available to respond to emergency 999 calls. It is a powerful point.

I said at the beginning that there is a crime epidemic in Batley and Spen. I know that that is strong language, but I think my speech has proved that it is justified. I very much look forward to hearing the contributions from other hon. Members and the Minister, so I will not take up too much more time but finish with this. The challenge is that cities, towns and rural areas are often very different, but the ambition should be the same. Crime ruins lives, and citizens should not be blighted by it or live in fear of it. The purpose of this debate is not just money but attention being needed elsewhere.

Does the Minister have plans to undertake an audit of crime in towns? My office staff and I tried hard to find data about crime in towns compared with cities, and it is not available. Will she and her Government produce a report that shows the difference in the levels of reported crime and crime that has been resolved in towns, compared with cities? We also need a greater understanding of where money is spent. Most police force areas include towns, cities and rural areas. Perhaps the Minister can work with police forces on that and update the House at a later date.

Several hon. Members rose—

James Gray (in the Chair): Order. The hon. Member for High Peak (Ruth George) was not here at the beginning of the debate, so I will not call her. Incidentally, I do not think that she or her hon. Friends should really have arrived in the middle of the debate and intervened straightaway, not having been here throughout the speech of the hon. Member for Batley and Spen (Tracy Brabin). The hon. Member for High Peak will have to forgive me for mildly ticking her off.

5.1 pm

Derek Thomas (St Ives) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member for Batley and Spen (Tracy Brabin) on securing this important debate. It is great to have the opportunity to talk about policing and to commend our policemen and women, who do a fantastic job in difficult circumstances. There is no doubt that they face difficulties. We have fewer police and police community support officers, and that has created problems. I remind hon. Members and everyone who is listening that if Labour had not left the finances in such a state, perhaps that would not have happened. [Interruption.] Labour Members can argue about that, but the bottom line is that if the money is not there, we cannot employ the police we need. I have not met a politician on either side of the House who wants fewer police and to make the environment more difficult for them. Difficult decisions had to be made because the money was not there. We have to accept that and work together to make our communities safer.

I meet my police a lot and spend a lot of time with them. It annoys my police and crime commissioner that I have such a close relationship with them. They tell me not just that there is a lack of cash—there certainly is—and that they have lost lots of police officers, although that is certainly the case, but that crime has changed dramatically in the period we are talking about. They have to spend a huge amount of resources on counter-terrorism, even in west Cornwall and the far south-west. Hon. Members might think that it is not an issue there, but people come in through our ports and harbours, and they need to be followed, arrested and dealt with.

The police also say that they are spending a lot of time and money investigating historical sex crime and abuse. We must recognise that this debate is about not just money but attention being needed elsewhere.

Julian Knight (Solihull) (Con): My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech, as usual. Does he agree that we hear a lot about rurality in this place, but sometimes towns next to large conurbations have resources sucked out of them? Police stations are closing in Solihull, yet resources are going directly to Birmingham all the time. That is sometimes a huge challenge for those towns.

Derek Thomas: I welcome that intervention. I assure my hon. Friend that every person in Cornwall knows that argument. For a long time, including before we came to power, resources have been concentrated in Exeter and Devon, rather than in Cornwall, and that has always been a bone of contention. We have argued strongly that resources are needed right down as far as Penzance and the Isles of Scilly.

There is no doubt that in towns in Cornwall, there has been a rise in crime—sometimes violent crime, but certainly drug-related crime. I have talked about the change in the way that things are happening, and certainly drugs are moving around differently. The Government and the police and crime commissioner have made...
resources available, and have concentrated them in areas such as Penzance and elsewhere in Cornwall where people just did not feel safe. Things were going on in broad daylight that would not have gone on in the past. I completely accept that as we reduce numbers and the visibility of the police, other things are allowed to happen, which much be addressed.

Money has been poured in, and we have seen improvements, although there is still lots to do. The key thing is to communicate to the public that they must report every incident they see, even if they sometimes feel that that is not acted upon. The police tell me that the intelligence they collect is really useful in helping them get to the root of the problem, rather than just deal with the individual on the street corner causing a problem.

I pay tribute to Cornwall Council, the safer communities teams and the police in Cornwall for working together effectively over the past 18 months or so to address these problems, but as my hon. Friend the Member for Solihull (Julian Knight) said, that has sucked resources from other parts of my constituency. I ask the Minister to consider the audit that the hon. Member for Batley and Spen recommended. As resources have been reduced and focused on areas with particular problems, we have begun to see low but concerning levels of crime, antisocial behaviour, and alcohol and drug misuse in our very small towns, and people are not used to that. I represent a town that was always awarded the title of safest town in the country, but now people come to me because they are concerned about things going on—at night, but also in the daytime—that they are not used to seeing. When that happens, it does not just make life uncomfortable for people, but harms the individuals who are caught up in that behaviour. There are opportunities that were not there before.

I ask the Minister to have a look at what is going on in very small towns where we are seeing problems. She should speak to police chiefs about how they will address that, and about what resources they can be given to put people on the street and to engage with the community. I have hosted meetings in St Ives and Helston with businesses, local communities and the police to talk about how communities and businesses can know when to report stuff, what to report and who they should report it to. It is really important that the police know where their resources are needed.

No one in this Chamber would deny that people deserve to feel safe and live in a place they can feel proud of. When they see concerning levels of antisocial behaviour and drug and alcohol misuse, their feeling of pride and safety is significantly compromised.

Siobhain McDonagh (Mitcham and Morden) (Lab): Will the hon. Gentleman also consider the impact that antisocial behaviour has on local businesses and restaurants? After a stabbing in Mitcham town centre only two weeks ago, the restaurateur of the local Italian restaurant said that his business dropped by 20%. Even though the stabbing was linked to gang issues that were of no consequence to the rest of the community, it made people feel unsafe, and they no longer wanted to go to his restaurant.

Derek Thomas: I welcome that intervention. High streets are in big enough trouble as it is without all this stuff going on. In St Ives and Penzance, people started to put stuff on Facebook. People who know St Ives will know that it is a massive tourist attraction, as are Helston and the Lizard. I am concerned about what the people putting stuff on Facebook are doing to their local economy by suggesting that those towns are not places to visit. The hon. Lady is absolutely right that there is a real impact on the local economy, which we must obviously work to support more effectively.

We do not want our families and children to be confronted by these problems or—dare I say it?—dragged into them. Policing is obviously important, but keeping people safe is about much more than how the police do their job and how visible they are. Will the Minister also look at what can be done to support local initiatives, often in the voluntary sector, that work with the police and the local authorities to nip these issues in the bud, and to support people who would otherwise be drawn into the criminal justice system or engage in behaviour that can be a slippery slope? We have all seen that in families that we represent.

Can the Minister talk to police chiefs about what is going on in rural areas? There is growing concern, and it is absolutely right that we nip the problem in the bud. I am grateful for the opportunity to debate the issue; it is the right debate to have. Hopefully, we can work across the House to make our constituencies safer, and to make them places of which we can be proud.

Several hon. Members rose—

James Gray (in the Chair): Hon. Members now have two minutes. I call Mike Hill.

5.9 pm

Mike Hill (Hartlepool) (Lab): Thank you Mr Gray; it is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Batley and Spen (Tracy Brabin) on securing this debate.

I confess that Hartlepool is not a small town by any means, but the constituency is made up of small and distinct communities, such as the Headland, and villages, such as Greatham, Newton Bewley, Dalton Piercey, Hart and Elwick. Although we are part of County Durham by nature—Hartlepool is its historic port—we are in reality one of four local authority areas in the Tees valley that are covered by Cleveland police, which is one of the smallest forces in the country.

The Government’s austerity agenda means that Cleveland police force has suffered a 37% reduction in its staffing budget since 2010, which has resulted in the loss of 500 frontline officers and a substantial number of police community support officers since then. The net effect of policing cuts on Hartlepool was made clear to the nation when my constituency became the focus of a BBC film that was broadcast on the national news: it brought home the stark reality that in a town of 92,028 at the last count, only 10 police officers were on duty on a Saturday night.

Understandably, the reaction of my constituents was a feeling that streets and communities had been abandoned, and that the film was an advert to criminals, showing them that Hartlepool lay unprotected. To compound that, local police cells had been mothballed because of
budget pressures, meaning a 30-mile round trip to the custody cells in Middlesbrough for officers depositing offenders.

We have just recruited a new chief constable, Richard Lewis. One of his first jobs was to come to Hartlepool to witness for himself the strength of feeling in our communities. Hartlepool and its outlying villages have never been abandoned by the police—far from it. We have one of the best multi-agency crime prevention teams in the area, and a strong neighbourhood policing ethic. Resources are so stretched, however, that there is a distinct lack of bobbies on the beat, and because of increased demands on police officers’ time, some of the basics are beginning to suffer. It is sad to say, but the number of incidents that the police have failed or not had the capacity to deal with is increasing, according to my mailbag. That includes break-ins, burglaries, damage to vehicles and even assaults.

Cleveland police force is doing what it can by trying to refocus on emergency calls and increasing the number of special constables in its ranks. It is clear as day, however, that without proper funding, the force is fighting with one arm tied behind its back. For our rural communities—villages in particular—the thinner the blue line is spread, the more difficult it becomes to maintain proportionate policing cover. Rural crime is as much an aspect of life in my constituency as urban crime is in urban areas. This situation simply cannot continue. It is imperative that the Government act now for the good of my constituents.

I will make two points to end my speech. First, single-crew policing, which correlates with crime, presents a threat to individual officers attending violent crime scenes. Secondly, only this week, a 48-year-old man was held down by two men and robbed in broad daylight, at half-past one in the afternoon, outside our local hospital. That is not Hartlepool.

James Gray (in the Chair): My mistake; we have slightly more time than I thought. The Front-Bench speeches will start at 5.22 pm.

5.13 pm

Siobhain McDonagh (Mitcham and Morden) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Gray; it is a pleasure to serve under your chairship. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Batley and Spen (Tracy Brabin) on securing this important debate.

Perhaps more controversially, I would say that most people do not see themselves as living in one city or town. Even within a city, they see themselves as living in towns. In my constituency of Mitcham and Morden, people live in Mitcham. They do not live in the borough of Merton or in London, but in Mitcham. That is the area that they are concerned about.

Although Merton is regarded as the fourth safest borough in London, to people living in Mitcham that does not wash when they see escalating antisocial behaviour in the town centre and how petty crime quickly becomes serious crime if left unchecked. If I have time, I will also talk about the sale of air guns in high street shops and the desperate need for more school police officers.

Mitcham town centre is unfortunately a hotbed of antisocial behaviour in the heart of the suburbs. Unchecked antisocial behaviour is the first step on a very slippery slope to the level of crime that we have heard described in the debate; the gulf between antisocial behaviour and serious crime is not as large as many of us allow ourselves to believe. There are small steps between noise and nuisance, drinking and drunkenness, and inconvenience and illegality.

When such antisocial behaviour goes unchecked, it begins to foster and grow. That is about what becomes normal and acceptable, and what goes unchallenged—for example the drug takers who routinely gather outside my constituent Alberta’s backyard in Mitcham, or the street drinking and urinating that has become commonplace in the town centre, or the atmosphere of noise and nuisance that street drinking encourages. All of that often goes unpolicéd.

Why does antisocial behaviour go unchecked? It is because we no longer have enough bobbies on the beat to control it. The simple truth is that there is no substitute for a visible police presence in the community. Is it any wonder that Merton alone has lost 90 police officers since 2010, when the Met has been forced to make more than £700 million in cuts in that time, with a further £325 million to be cut by 2021? So much for the end of austerity. The challenge that that depleted force faces is alarming. It simply does not have the support or resources from this Government to challenge the crime that is frightening our streets.

Mrs. B wrote to me to describe how understandably terrified she was when she looked out of her kitchen window and saw a group of young men on bikes with 40-inch machetes. Mr. G wrote to me in horror last month after seeing a man attacked with yet another machete, less than 24 hours after multiple stabbings nearby. He said:

“I’m angry that this has happened where I live and in such a blatant way. I feel sad at how cheap life would seem to these people. And I’m absolutely frustrated with the disintegration of any real responsibility from the state on this issue.”

How many more people need to die on our streets? How many more families need to grieve the tragic loss of a loved one? How many warnings need to be given? We simply need more police on our streets.

In the light of the spread of violent crime across our country, we in this Chamber all have a responsibility to ensure that our streets are safe. That is why I am so furious to report that a store in my constituency is selling guns—yes, guns. Cash Exchange is—legally, I must say—selling airguns in my constituency. We do not have rolling fields; we do not have a rural culture. We have airguns masquerading as sub-machine-guns, which are sold to people who want to look intimidating and frightening on our streets, and it is done legally. Why is the display of those weapons permitted by law? Why is their sale not licensed by the police? Why are the Government not taking active steps to ensure our safety? We do not need those guns in shops in suburban south London.

This is not just about our streets, but about our schools. National funding cuts and high vacancy rates have led to the decline of our treasured school police officers. My local headteachers wrote to me describing school police officers as instrumental in building relationships within their school communities, breaking
down the barriers that some families have with the police, and ensuring that more youngsters leave school with a positive view of the police. Sessions and workshops led by officers are important, but they simply do not provide a like-for-like alternative for the school police officer who those youngsters get to know and trust.

Two of the secondary schools in my constituency now share just one school police officer; the other secondary school shares an officer with a school at the other end of the borough. There is a total of just seven officers for Merton’s secondary schools and further education college. That is simply not enough. This is not about point scoring but about the safety of our young people. Adequately funding our police force so that school police officers can be retained is essential to ensuring the safety of those young people.

I ask loud and clear: bring back bobbies on the beat; stop the sale of airguns on our high streets; and stop the loss of schools police officers from our secondary schools. The first duty of any Government is to ensure the protection of their citizens. By that measure, the failure of this Government is devastating.

**James Gray (in the Chair):** There are two minutes for Mr Jim Shannon.

5.20 pm

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): Thank you, Mr Gray. I also thank the hon. Member for Batley and Spen (Tracy Brabin) for securing the debate and the opportunity for us to participate.

I am conscious that the Minister does not have responsibility for policing or antisocial behaviour in Northern Ireland, but I want to make a contribution to describe what we have done in Northern Ireland and in my constituency in particular. That might add to the debate and help us see how we can move forward.

The issue of antisocial behaviour, of misbehaviour, causes concern. Our force, the Police Service of Northern Ireland, has had its numbers reduced. Rural community policing has not existed since the closures of the village police stations. Some seven have closed over the years—Portaferry, Greyabbey, Donaghadee, Saintfield, Carryduff, Killyleagh and Ballynahinch— with one on the edge of my constituency and the other six in it. No longer is a police officer in a position to take a call, go round to the problem area, lift the children and bring them home to their parents to be dealt with—we simply do not have the police numbers to do that.

Unfortunately, groups of young people can, perhaps inadvertently or unknowingly, cause hassle. Music playing in a field behind someone’s house at midnight is not okay, because it affects a mother and her children who are trying to sleep. Throwing cigarettes and matches into a farmer’s field in a dry spell might cause a fire. Those are all important issues for many people. To the parents who do not know where their child is or what their child is doing, that should be a concern.

Many people try to address antisocial behaviour by creating church groups in their areas. A local church group runs an event on a Saturday night in Newtownards. That helps for part of the time, but not beyond 10 pm.

For years, community workers, the PSNI, the council antisocial behaviour team and street pastors have worked together to build up relations with the children and try to find a way forward. What really helped make the change, however, was when planning permission was granted for a development in the area they went to, so the misbehaviour did not happen any longer.

Churches and volunteer groups do a tremendous job, but they cannot run half the night, and antisocial behaviour teams are challenged. What is the answer? We have to put in a foundation. That means more bodies—

**James Gray (in the Chair):** Order. Sadly, the House will never know what the answer is. It is time to call the first of the Front Benchers.

5.22 pm

**Stuart C. McDonald** (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mr Gray, and to follow the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon)—I am sorry he was cut off in his prime.

I thank the hon. Member for Batley and Spen (Tracy Brabin) for securing the debate and for her passionate and eloquent introduction. As she said, we all want to feel safe in our homes and communities. That is as true of constituents living in smaller towns as of those who live anywhere else. It means safety from the full range of offences, from serious violence to antisocial behaviour. As she and other Members have illustrated with some pretty horrifying examples, too many people are impacted by all that. I will briefly set out what the SNP sees as the key strategies for driving down crime and antisocial behaviour.

My starting point is slightly different, because in Scotland, thankfully, we have continued to see a significant and sustained fall in crime over the past decade. Yesterday, for example, we saw analysis showing that attempted murders and serious assaults are down by about 38% on 10 years ago. We have also seen a long-term sustained reduction in experiences and perceptions of antisocial behaviour. I pay tribute to and thank all who have been involved in setting that downward trajectory. None of that is to say that there will not be bumps along the way, that the trend will continue in one direction every single year, or that we take the trend for granted; there is always more that can and must be done.

On that note, as the hon. Member for Batley and Spen said, the work includes not only policing—though that is a focus of this debate—but prevention. It is not simply the police who have to be involved, but every single Government Department.

**Hugh Gaffney** (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman and I share North Lanarkshire Council. We have heard stories from around the country, and it is exactly the same in Scotland—that is what we are hearing. This year in North Lanarkshire, 900 formal warnings have been given for antisocial behaviour, and 200 have been prevented from going further with mediation. Will he congratulate North Lanarkshire Council on its work?

**Stuart C. McDonald**: I am happy to congratulate North Lanarkshire Council on that work, which emphasises the role that local authorities have to play. Among the statistics from yesterday was the 35% fall in serious
violence and attempted murder in North Lanarkshire, so pretty much every part of Scotland is benefiting from some of that work. The point that I was making, however, is that it has to be a whole-systems approach: it is not just about policing, but about local authorities and every single Government Department being involved in the challenge.

On prevention—or nipping things in the bud, as the hon. Member for St Ives (Derek Thomas) pithily put it—a lot has already been said in recent debates about the work of the violence reduction unit in Glasgow, which has also been rolled out elsewhere. The “No Knives Better Lives” campaign and programme have complemented other youth-diversionary interventions and activities. The mentors for violence prevention programme is designed to lead young people to more positive destinations and has 140 schools across 22 local authorities taking part. Another initiative, under the Proceeds of Crime Act 2002, is the cashback for communities fund, through which almost £100 million seized from criminals over the past 10 years has been invested directly in partnership organisations that put on free activities for those who might be at risk or who live in areas with higher than usual crime rates.

Policies need to address head-on the causes of offending behaviour. We know that deprivation is linked to higher crime rates, which is why in years ahead there will be additional investment and focus in the next phase of cashback for communities to raise the attainment of young people from areas of deprivation across Scotland, or those who are at risk of exclusion from schools or of unemployment. That mirrors education policies such as those who are at risk of exclusion from schools or of unemployment. That mirrors education policies such as second driver of rising crime is cuts to youth services. What have this Government done? They have cut police numbers and slashed funding for youth services. To begin with the police cuts, it is important to remind the House that the Conservative party promised the public that its cuts would not hit the policing frontline. One week before the 2010 election, the previous Tory leader, David Cameron, said:

“Any cabinet minister who comes to me and says ‘here are my plans’ and they involve frontline reductions, they’ll be sent straight back to their department”.

Five years later, the current Prime Minister claimed that the frontline service had been protected, but we now know that that was not true.

Police numbers are at their lowest for 30 years. We have lost 21,000 officers, more than 6,000 PCSOs and more than 15,000 police staff, including crime investigators. My own police force in Greater Manchester has lost 2,000 officers since 2010. No Government in post-war history—none—have cut police numbers in every year that they have been in office.

The public instinctively understand that cutting police numbers causes rising crime. After all, as the Home Secretary said recently, it is “not exactly rocket science”. Under-resourced police are forced to focus purely on reactive policing. Hotspot policing is known to reduce crime in areas where there has been a surge. Far from simply pushing it away into other areas, evidence suggests that the benefits are felt in areas outside where the hotspot policing is focused. It should therefore concern hon. Members that Chief Constable Thornton, the chair of the National Police Chiefs’ Council says:

“I am utterly convinced that intelligence-led policing with a focus on prolific offenders and hot-spot locations makes a real difference. But few officers and staff are able to do less policing.”

Local policing has been shown to increase the legitimacy of the police, which encourages the local community to provide intelligence and report crimes and suspicious behaviour.

Last year, as part of the national initiative to spend a day with the police, I spent a day with my old force, Greater Manchester police. The officers told me that they no longer had the resources to go into schools and talk to students about what the police do and how to stay safe—a vital part of building community links.

There is no doubt that the Tories have cut frontline policing, which is driving rising crime.

The second driver of rising crime is cuts to youth services. Our social safety net has been steadily unpicked by this Government. The most vulnerable are struggling to get support, starting at the very first stage of life. Sure Start was a lifeline for many vulnerable families, but it has been cut back and the support it can provide has been reduced. Schools have been crushed under the weight of punitive funding pressure. Cost cutting has hit teaching assistants and special educational needs—just the kind of targeted support that is needed by young people who are falling behind.
Chronic underfunding of the NHS means that young people are routinely denied the mental health support we know can reduce aggression. For those who set out on the wrong path, the Government have ensured an almost total lack of provision for those involved in gangs. Even at this late stage, education, training, employment and health services can reduce violence, including homicides. The sad truth is that, despite the research showing that specialist services for vulnerable youngsters and families can fundamentally alter outcomes, there is not the political will to create a system that will support them. Those decisions taken together have precipitated the crisis we face today.

The Government have cut police numbers to a historic low and cut youth services at every stage of development, and they are now surprised by record crime levels. The most despicable criminals are exploiting the space where well-run and effective early intervention, prevention and diversion strategies once existed.

Jim Shannon: Will the Minister give way?

Siobhain McDonagh: Does the Minister realise how maddening the comment, “You are not likely to be the victim”, is to our constituents? If somebody is stabbed in their street or there is a drunk and disorderly person in their shopping centre, they are the victims, and that has an impact on their behaviour.

Victoria Atkins: That is the finding of the Office for National Statistics. We have to work on the evidence; that is the way in which we formulate policy. It is a great shame that the hon. Lady was not able to join the briefing session I held yesterday for colleagues from across the House, to update them on our actions to tackle serious violence. She would have seen the range of activity going on, not just in London but across the country, to tackle crime and the causes of criminal activity. Although the statistics are very worrying at the moment—that is why we are acting as we are—it was acknowledged yesterday in the meeting that there is a cyclical element to them. We saw similar spikes in serious violence in the mid to late 2000s. We bore down on them, and we need to ensure that our actions have a similar impact.

In our serious violence strategy, we put a much greater focus on steering young people away from crime while continuing to promote a strong law enforcement response. We are investing in early intervention projects—my hon. Friend the Member for St Ives (Derek Thomas) made that important point. I am delighted to tell the hon. Member for Batley and Spen that West Yorkshire is receiving more than £1 million until March next year to allow the police, community safety partnerships and others to work together on a programme of early intervention projects to prevent serious violence in the county.

We have also launched the national county lines co-ordination centre, and its work has produced huge benefits; in a single week in May, there were 586 arrests, and 519 vulnerable adults and 364 children were engaged with for safeguarding purposes. I am sure that many colleagues are conscious of the exploitation of young people by criminal gangs. On serious violence, we are looking at how gangs communicate in the 21st century and helping the police to tackle gang-related activity on social media.

We recently passed the Offensive Weapons Act 2019, which tightens up the law on the sale of knives and corrosive substances. We are in the middle of a consultation, to which I encourage hon. Members to respond; on a new legal duty to underpin a public health approach to tackling serious violence. We have introduced a new £200 million youth endowment fund that will be delivered over 10 years. It is locked in. That money will be invested, and it will support long-term interventions with children and young people at risk of involvement.
with crime and violence. We are conducting an independent review of drug misuse, which will report its initial findings to the Home Secretary in the summer.

As colleagues have mentioned, we have established vehicle theft and burglary taskforces to bring together Government, the police and industry in order to improve our response to those crimes. With reference to burglaries, we are looking at building standards and whether we can design out crime, as has happened in the past with vehicle theft. We continue our work with moped-enabled crimes; in London there has been a heartening decrease in that type of crime. That shows that working across civil society, industry and local authorities can really bring dividends. Colleagues will also be aware of the announcements about retail crime we made recently with regard to the Offensive Weapons Act. I very much hope that we will be able to announce the results of that consultation in due course.

Hon. Members also mentioned the impact of antisocial behaviour. We absolutely recognise the impact that forms of antisocial behaviour can have, which is precisely why we introduced the Anti-social Behaviour, Crime and Policing Act 2014. The point of the six powers in that Act is that they are flexible and give local forces and local authorities discretion in how they deal with instances and patterns of antisocial behaviour in their areas.

In summary, we very much recognise the impact of crime on not just big cities, but market towns, urban towns, if I am allowed to use that phrase, and villages. That is precisely why, as well as putting in place the suite of measures that we have touched on in this important debate, we have secured an extra £1 billion of funding for the police. That is already enabling police and crime commissioners, including in West Yorkshire, to increase the recruitment of police officers.

As always, I thank hon. Members for their contributions. I very much look forward to debating this issue again in the future. I think we all recognise that concerns about the safety of our constituents and our communities are central to our work here, and to our taking a collegiate approach across the House to ensuring that our country is a safe and comforting place in which to live.

5.41 pm

**Tracy Brabin:** I thank colleagues across the House for their contributions. It is really interesting to know that I am not alone in representing a community that feels that crime has got out of hand. I congratulate West Yorkshire police on the work it does. The Minister talked about money for the police, but the money for West Yorkshire comes from an increase in the precept—the precept is increased in order to increase the number of police officers—so we are paying for it.

I was happy to attend the serious violence strategy meeting, at which I learned a lot. It was really interesting, and a lot of initiatives seem to be going on. However, those initiatives feel focused on knife crime, which is the sort of violent crime that comes at the end. I asked at the meeting what is being done to intervene right at the beginning, and in our communities, to ensure that people do not feel abandoned or that crime is their only hope of getting money, having status or whatever, and are not vulnerable to gangs and so on. As my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Gorton (Afzal Khan) said, early intervention is so important.

Although I understand why it was said, there is an element of complacency around this, in that—

**James Gray (in the Chair):** Order. I am sorry to interrupt the hon. Lady in full flow. We all wanted to hear it, but the rules are strict, and we must stop at precisely the right second.

5.43 pm

*Motion lapsed, and sitting adjourned without Question put (Standing Order No. 10 (14)).*
Nicky Morgan (Loughborough) (Con): I beg to move, That this House has considered the Twenty-ninth Report of the Treasury Committee, Consumers’ access to financial services, HC 1642.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Walker. The Treasury Committee’s report “Consumers’ access to financial services” was published last month, its conclusions having been agreed by the Committee unanimously. The inquiry was launched in November 2018 to assess whether certain groups of consumers were excluded from getting a basic level of service from financial services providers, whether the regulatory landscape provided sufficient enforcement to ensure that customers could access financial services, and, if not, which remedies were needed.

Our report covered a lot of ground, so I will focus on four of its main conclusions. First, financial exclusion or vulnerability can affect us all at some point in our lives. Secondly, the Post Office alone is not a solution to access financial services or financial exclusion is not limited to those we might naturally associate with being vulnerable, because vulnerability can happen to any of us at any stage of our lives. The FCA told us that its definition of vulnerability as “someone who, due to their personal circumstances, is especially susceptible to detriment, particularly when a firm is not acting with appropriate levels of care” could include up to half the population at any one time.

Thirdly, a legal duty of care for financial services providers towards their customers is needed if the Financial Conduct Authority cannot make firms act in their customers’ interests at all times. Fourthly, at present the Equalities and Human Rights Commission does not have the resources to enforce financial services firms’ compliance with the Equality Act 2010, and therefore the Financial Conduct Authority should be given the power to do so.

Before I go into more detail on those four main conclusions, I will give a brief outline of the inquiry’s scope. We received almost 80 written evidence submissions, and we held five oral evidence sessions and two outreach events with members of the public and local charities—one in Waterloo, London, and one in Newcastle. I put on record the Committee’s thanks to everybody who sent us evidence and took part in those events. When I was elected by the House as Chair of the Treasury Committee, I was determined that our inquiries would not just talk about things that affect the City of London and our large financial institutions, but would concentrate on issues that make a real difference to consumers’, and our constituents’, lives. I hope that we have been able to do that in this inquiry.

The oral evidence sessions were held with advice groups and charities representing different groups in society. Members of the House of Lords who had previously carried out work on financial exclusion, representatives from banks and the Post Office, and the regulators with the power to make the changes needed—the Financial Conduct Authority, the Equalities and Human Rights Commission, and the Equality Advisory Support Service, which offers support to individuals with a disability dispute.

It is worth stopping to think about why financial inclusion matters. It is something that many of us will take for granted, perhaps until a time in our lives when we are excluded or suffering, or until we come across a constituency case of somebody struggling. Eleanor Southwood, the chair of the Royal National Institute of Blind People, said in her evidence:

“People experience enormous frustration. But it is also about financial literacy. It is about financial independence. It is about not being more vulnerable to any kind of financial abuse, because you are entirely on top of and aware of your own financial arrangements and situations.”

She went on to say that it “comes back to the fundamental issues about confidence, the loss of confidence, the loss of confidence in yourself to understand the information.”

I remember the oral evidence that I heard from one of the charities at our roundtable in Waterloo, not very far from here. In this Chamber, we probably take financial inclusion for granted, but an inability to be in charge of one’s finances is sometimes a precursor to an inability to participate fully in society. That is something that we should all be concerned about.

There are many different elements to how consumers access financial services and, as the Committee heard, there are many ways in which people can be excluded. We started by trying to establish which customers we were most concerned about, but the reality is that access to financial services or financial exclusion is not limited to those we might naturally associate with being vulnerable, because vulnerability can happen to any of us at any stage of our lives. The FCA told us that its definition of vulnerability as “someone who, due to their personal circumstances, is especially susceptible to detriment, particularly when a firm is not acting with appropriate levels of care” could include up to half the population at any one time.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the right hon. Lady, who came into this House at the same time as I did; indeed, she made her maiden speech just before I made mine, so we have had that relationship in Parliament for a long time. She is aware of my constituents the Armstrons. I have written to her, the Minister and the Department about them. They ended up in company insolvency and then personal bankruptcy, despite repeatedly advising their bank and lawyers that Mr Armstrong was very unwell over a sustained period.

The right hon. Lady referred to vulnerability, and paragraph 179 of the Treasury Committee’s report refers to it very clearly, stating:

“We therefore support the FCA’s intention to do so through a more balanced definition of ‘vulnerability’.”

Will that new recommendation ensure that we have the chance to protect people such as those I mentioned, whom she is aware of through her position as Chair of the Committee? Also, does she agree that not only the UK financial services industry but regulators at the FCA and the Financial Ombudsman Service must be part of any future work—
Mr Charles Walker (in the Chair): Order. That is enough questions.

Nicky Morgan: I thank the hon. Gentleman. He is a legal friend speaking in so many debates in this House, and I would feel rather excluded if he were not here today. I am grateful to him for raising those issues. He is passionate advocate for his constituents, and has raised a number of cases with me as Chair of the Treasury Committee. He is right that a broad definition of vulnerability is important. People will be vulnerable at different times of their lives. He knows that in a separate inquiry we have been looking at the finances of small and medium-sized enterprises, many of which are almost no bigger than retail customers, and may be exposed to the same vulnerabilities.

My understanding on the definition is that the FCA has published its consultation and is asking about vulnerability. In the inquiry, we wanted to ensure that when we talk about vulnerability, we are not limited to a narrow definition, and that when those working in financial services think about vulnerability, they do so in the broadest possible sense, realising that people come in and out of being vulnerable.

In the case of the hon. Gentleman’s constituents, it is worth re-asking the question about how customers appear to those who advise them. We must also recognise that some people will not identify themselves as vulnerable. That is another thing that we heard during the roundtable. People do not want to tell their bank that they are vulnerable because they are concerned that it might lead to higher charges, or even losing an account or not being offered insurance.

Jim Shannon: With your permission, Mr Walker—

Mr Charles Walker (in the Chair): You can make as many interventions as you like, Mr Shannon—make 10—but brevity is the key. The Floor is yours.

Jim Shannon: This intervention will be brief, unlike the last one—apologies for that. Regulators at the FCA and the FOS need to do more to ensure that the most vulnerable in our society are afforded the appropriate response and interactions. Does the right hon. Lady agree that those regulators must do better?

Nicky Morgan: I do. I think the FCA is very aware of that, and wants to do better. That is why it has published the consultation on the definition of vulnerability. The hon. Gentleman and I have had previous conversations about the Financial Ombudsman Service, and I have had correspondence with other Members of this House. We all know that the FOS can sometimes struggle to offer the remedies and the speedy service that people are looking for. The FOS performs an important function, and its new leadership is very aware of the challenges. In particular, people feel that they do not have the ability to go to the Financial Ombudsman Service, which puts pressure on it. However, the basic conclusion of our report is that everybody involved in financial services could do more.

Financial exclusion is a broad issue that can and does affect us all in many different ways. The key areas that the Committee chose to look at were why financial inclusion matters, which I hope I have already captured in my earlier remarks; the many issues that vulnerable consumers face, such as being able to understand their bank statements and communicate with their service providers in the way that they want to; and the closure of local bank branches and the use of post offices as a replacement.

Colin Clark (Gordon) (Con): As a member of the Treasury Committee, I was glad to get into what is a vital issue in Scotland and rural parts of the country. Scotland, which is a 63% increase from 2016-17, and as of May, there were 3,998,000 lasting powers of attorney registered with the Office of the Public Guardian, which is a 63% increase from 2016-17, and as of May, there were 3,998,000 lasting powers of attorney registered...
in total. That provides challenges for the carer who has power of attorney, in terms of accessing advice on behalf of the person they are looking after, and for the financial services institution, because it has to judge how much security it wants everyone to go through before it talks to them about account details, while at the same time not making its consumers’ or their carers’ lives more challenging than they already are.

We looked at whether changes to financial services regulation were necessary, such as the introduction of a duty of care to customers, similar to that which exists in legal services. We also investigated whether vulnerable customers were more likely to pay a so-called loyalty penalty for staying with their providers, and the ways in which consumers could be provided with greater access to low-cost credit.

Let me turn to our headline conclusions. I have already set out why financial inclusion is important and why it is a basic right when it comes to being part of our society. It is vital that all financial services providers do what they can to empower consumers to maintain their personal finances and mental health. The Committee heard that firms can do that by incorporating a universal design approach in all their interactions with every customer, which means that all customers, no matter what their individual needs, will be catered for. That can be done by having compassionate, well-trained staff, who ask their customers how they would like to be communicated with, and by making sure that every communication channel is available to them.

On bank closures, which I have already touched on, large sections of society still rely on bank branches and face-to-face conversations with trained staff who understand financial services to carry out their banking needs, which can range from making transactions to taking out mortgages, credit cards or insurance policies. As I am sure hon. Members present can testify, sadly, for many communities, a local bank branch and, increasingly, free-to-use ATMs are becoming a thing of the past.

As we have heard, in many cases banks are redirecting their customers to local post offices to carry out their day-to-day banking, but that has its limits. The Post Office cannot help customers to set up basic banking transactions such as direct debits, nor does it sell mortgages or credit card in-branch. Even if it did, the layout of many post offices is simply not conducive to giving customers the privacy required to discuss their personal finances.

The Post Office is not a replacement for a rapidly declining branch network, as was apparent during the TSB IT meltdown last year, when customers were told that the best way to make contact with the bank was through their local branch. The TSB branch network actually helped the bank out of its difficulty, because branch staff were by and large very impressive and actually helped the bank out of its difficulty, because branch staff were by and large very impressive and actually helped the bank out of its difficulty, because branch staff were by and large very impressive and actually helped the bank out of its difficulty, because branch staff were by and large very impressive and actually helped the bank out of its difficulty, because branch staff were by and large very impressive and actually helped the bank out of its difficulty, because branch staff were by and large very impressive and actually helped the bank out of its difficulty.

At present, no other statutory body has that power. The FCA told the Committee that it has the expertise and resources, but not the power to act. Therefore, the Committee concluded that the Government should give the FCA the power to take on the enforcement of individual cases relating to financial firms’ compliance with the Equality Act, in addition to the Equality and Human Rights Commission.

There are many other interesting and important aspects of our report that I could talk about, but I will not detain hon. Members for much longer. I urge all hon. Members present to read the Committee’s recommendations in full. The Committee looks forward to hearing the Government’s and the regulator’s responses in due course. I welcome the opportunity to have the debate and ask the Minister to respond.
We also know that one of the behaviours of certain mental health conditions can be rather exuberant behaviour, sometimes typified by spending. We have one of the most sophisticated financial centres in the world. We have pretty well every major bank represented in the City of London. It struck me, listening to the evidence from Katie Evans, the head of research and policy at the Money and Mental Health Policy Institute, that we can do better, because she said:

“At best, I have heard of people literally putting their credit cards in a Tupperware full of water and putting it in the freezer, which is fantastic: how clever for someone to come up with that system for themselves, to try to put in place the friction they need when they are unwell.”

We should not need people to freeze their credit cards to stop them spending if they have a vulnerability through a mental health condition, or a breakdown, or a crisis. We can do better. Our financial services providers can do better. We will hear today from the shadow Front-Bench spokespeople, and from the Minister, and I hope that we can all make sure that financial inclusion is something that we are championing from here on in.

Mr Charles Walker (in the Chair): I think I am going to call Marion Fellows, the Front-Bench spokesperson for the SNP.

1.51 pm

Marion Fellows (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): Thank you for calling me, Mr Walker, in spite of my tardiness. I apologise to everyone present—I ran as fast as I could.

Mr Charles Walker (in the Chair): You were 15 seconds late. I think anybody can forgive that.

Marion Fellows: To be fair, I thought it was more.

It is a real pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Walker. I commend the right hon. Member for Loughborough (Nicky Morgan) and her Committee for this really valuable report, on which I think most of us are agreed. As always, I want to give the Scottish perspective—I think I have got it down to a fine art now.

According to Which?, Scotland has lost more than a third of its bank and building society branches in just eight years. Some 610 branches closed down between 2010 and 2018. Santander’s recent decision to close 15 branches in Scotland will have a devastating impact on staff, customers and local firms. Branches will be lost right across central Scotland, in Alloa, St Andrews, Troon, Forfar and other places. It is of deep regret that the decision was made without the bank undertaking a full consultation with staff and local communities, which will be devastated by the closure of local services, and it is unacceptable that they will be shut so rapidly; all the branches will close by the end of the year.

The Treasury Committee is right when it says:

“there are still large sections of society who rely on bank branches to carry out their banking needs.”

That includes elderly people—although not all of them; we cannot all be lumped together—and small businesses, especially in rural areas that rely on tourism, where people are using cash. Those businesses need to be able to bank that money locally; otherwise, they will lose even more business when they are not on their premises but 20 or 30 miles away, trying to get to the nearest bank branch.

A bank branch network, or at least a face-to-face banking solution, is still a vital component of the financial services sector. The right hon. Lady referred to how important that was in the case of TSB. A branch network must be preserved. The UK Government must step in and act; they can no longer argue that they cannot intervene. They made a similar argument on RBS closing branches, but we now know the Treasury thought it was all right to force RBS to pull finance from customers through the asset protection scheme. The effect on consumers of the closures must be factored into the Government’s decisions.

We support the Committee view that, if necessary, “the Government should make changes to competition law to allow banks to share facilities in order to maintain a sustainable branch network”.

As the hon. Member for Gordon (Colin Clark) said, that cost should fall to the banks, not the customers. We also agree that “intervention by Government or the FCA may be necessary to force banks to provide a physical network for consumers.”

We agree with the Committee that “the Lending Standards Board—through its oversight of the Access to Banking Standard—should publish the examples of non-compliance by providers within its annual report on the Standard, to increase transparency and the potential for external scrutiny over branch closures.”

The SNP continues to lead the campaign at Westminster to protect our post office network. I have spoken in so many debates on post offices, and I sometimes feel I am in danger of repeating myself, but these things are worth saying over and over. We agree with the Committee that post offices “should not be seen as a replacement for a branch network, but a complementary proposition where available.”

Following our campaigning, the SNP has welcomed news that from October 2019, Post Office Ltd will raise the rates of payment that sub-postmasters receive for taking personal and business banking deposits. That will represent a near threefold increase on current rates. In my time as an MP, I have been consistently lobbied by sub-postmasters, because they are subsidising banking services to their own detriment. The impact of the closure of a post office following the closure of a bank branch is devastating, and not just in rural areas. In urban areas, too, there are vulnerable people who cannot move distances and who are only happy carrying out financial transactions with people they know and trust. That is extremely important.

The announcement of the increase in payments comes just weeks after my colleague and hon. Friended the Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire North (Gavin Newlands) secured a House of Commons debate on the sustainability of community and sub-post offices, in which he reiterated SNP calls to give sub-postmasters a fairer settlement. In recent months, as the SNP spokesperson for small business, I have written to the UK Government calling for changes to strengthen the post office network. Sub-postmasters have continually raised concerns about not receiving adequate financial remuneration. The National Federation of SubPostmasters found in a recent survey...
of its members that one in five post offices risks closing in the next year as the result of poor remuneration from Post Office Ltd; many postmasters are paid less than minimum wage for running their shops. That cannot go on. We need sustainable post offices, not as a substitute for the banks, but as a complement.

The UK Government must go further and commit to a full and independent review of sub-postmaster pay. I know the Minister is from the Treasury, but it would be good if he could have a chat with the Minister for small business on our behalf. In addition, plans to close Crown branches at the centre of our communities must be reversed to ensure the full range of services people have enjoyed are still available.

We agree with the Committee that “The Post Office should not be subsidising the big six banks’ lack of a branch network...If a renegotiation of the current arrangements is necessary to make the scheme profitable, the Post Office should do so, with the full support of the Government.” We should not measure the success of Post Office Ltd on profit alone, which seems to be the prevalent measure at the moment.

We agree with the Committee that when post offices are left as the only way for customers to carry out basic banking practices, “the banks should be required to make provision for ‘banking hubs’ within the local Post Office. The ‘hub’ should be properly funded, with an agreed private and business banking provision set by the Department for Business, Energy, and Industrial Strategy (BEIS) and the Treasury. Postmasters must be trained, equipped and compensated to make the hubs viable. BEIS should make an immediate assessment of what the banking provision should be, the indicative cost per hub, and propose how the banks should fund it.”

The UK Government must act before a fifth of Scotland’s free ATMs start charging over the next year. That is another huge problem, especially for vulnerable people and those in isolated communities. They are having to travel further and further to access their own money, and are being charged more and more to do so.

It is almost impossible to spend money in London during the week, and I frequently arrive back in my constituency with no cash. We are used to that in this place, but it is not like that everywhere across the UK, or for everyone.

Nicky Morgan: The hon. Lady is making an excellent speech, and she makes an excellent point on access to cash. Does she agree that cash is very important for people who are on a very tight budget? We heard evidence that once it’s gone, it’s gone. Somebody who needs to watch every penny they spend will not have a contactless card that they just keep using; they need to be able to see how much cash they have left in their purse.

Marion Fellows: The right hon. Lady is absolutely correct. The fact that somebody’s very constrained budget can be further constrained by their having to pay to extract their own money from their bank is absolutely ridiculous in this day and age. People are living hand to mouth, and the loss of £2.50 or more every time they take their money out of their bank via an ATM is absolutely unforgivable.

A cross-party group of MPs found that more than 3,000 ATMs have closed in the last 18 months. According to the Treasury Committee, unless the UK Government step in to protect free-to-access ATMs, the UK is at risk of “inadvertently becoming a cashless society. For a large portion of society, including some of the most vulnerable, this would have stark consequences.”

The latest figures from LINK, the UK’s largest cash machine network, revealed that 1,300 ATMs were lost between the end of January and the beginning of July last year.

The consumer organisation Which? predicted that free cash machines would become a thing of the past, after it emerged that 1,700 ATMs in the UK switched to charging in the first three months of this year alone. Cash machines in Scotland have disappeared at a rate of 32 a month in the 11 months to April. According to Which?, Scotland lost 204 free-to-use cash machines, which is 4% of the network. That is unsustainable.

The ATM Industry Association has warned that a fifth of Scotland’s free ATMs will start charging customers in the next year. The association—its members include banks such as HSBC, independent ATM operators and payment systems such as Visa—says the problem revolves around a 10%, or 2p, cut in the fee that banks pay cash machine operators every time money is withdrawn. Banks are saving money by closing branches, then giving money to ATM providers. They warn that the move to charging cash machines will increase if LINK moves to cut the fee even further as part of a review that is due to be completed by the end of 2020.

Given the recent closures of bank branches and the lack of support provided to the post office network, the SNP is concerned that a lack of cash facilities will hurt families and small businesses across Scotland. For people in rural areas, and for the most vulnerable members of our communities who might have less access to transport and online support, often the only option is their local cash machine. It is totally inequitable that they effectively pay a tax on cash withdrawals.

The right hon. Lady talked about insurance companies and the difficulty in insuring when there are pre-existing conditions, something I recently had difficulty with. I totally empathise. Vulnerable people—especially people with mental health conditions, whom the right hon. Lady mentioned—need people on the other side of the table or desk who can help them overcome their fear, allay their suspicions, and help them to become fully working members of our society. Someone can be vulnerable one day and not vulnerable the next, and systems have to take account of that.

The right hon. Lady also talked about the difficulties with powers of attorney and the duty of care, which perhaps should be regulated. The SNP would not go against any of the recommendations on those subjects. It is absolutely inexcusable that Tory Ministers are refusing to lift a finger as communities face mass closures of local ATMs and bank branches; as we have heard, it is often the most vulnerable who use them. The consumer group Which? is calling on the UK Government to appoint a regulator to oversee cash infrastructure in the UK. It is vital that they consider the proposal and introduce practical solutions before the cash crisis loses Scotland a fifth of its ATMs.

The SNP echoes the Committee’s conclusion that the independent Access to Cash review’s recommendations should be accepted. They include recommendations to “guarantee consumer access to cash—ensuring that consumers can get cash wherever they live or work...take steps to keep cash accepted, whether by a local coffee shop or a large utility provider...call
Marion Fellows

for radical change to the wholesale cash infrastructure, moving from a commercial model to more of a ‘utility’ approach, which will keep cash sustainable for longer...government, regulators and the industry should make digital inclusion in payments a priority...a clear government policy on cash, supported by a joined-up regulatory approach which treats cash as a system.

We cannot go on leaving our most vulnerable communities and people behind. It is all right for people like us to do without cash, but it is not all right for huge swathes of our communities. I hope the Minister can agree to some of the Treasury Committee’s recommendations and help move forward the debate about post offices, bank hubs and so on.

2.6 pm

Anneliese Dodds (Oxford East) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to take part in this debate with you in the Chair, Mr Walker. I thank the right hon. Member for Loughborough (Nicky Morgan) for securing the debate and for the important work she undertakes as Chair of the Treasury Committee. I am particularly pleased that the Committee emphasised the importance of access to financial services and financial inclusion. As we have shown in this relatively short debate, it is an issue that potentially touches us all, because we can all become vulnerable, and access and inclusion are crucial elements of a functioning economy.

The beginning of the report features a quote from Sian Williams, the director of the Financial Health Exchange at Toynbee Hall, that stood out when I was preparing for the debate:

“We are in an environment where you have to be able to transact to survive.”

The statistics provide a very worrying picture, because many people are struggling. The Financial Conduct Authority estimates that 3% of UK adults cannot transact in that way because they have no current account and no alternative e-money account. That is a significant minority, and it includes some of the most vulnerable people. That indicates that much stronger action is needed.

I will focus my remarks on vulnerability, poverty, the availability of credit—particularly low-cost credit—post office banking, bank branch closures and the policy process in this area, particularly as it applies to basic bank accounts. The report quite rightly considers the relationship between financial exclusion and different types of vulnerability. Obviously, a consultation is going on at the moment on whether current definitions of vulnerability are appropriate. There is a very welcome focus on mental illness in the report.

I was struck by the right hon. Lady’s remarks and the case study she mentioned. Actually, we were promised that we would have so-called jam-jarring available within financial services by now. It is not standard, and nor is it standard in relation to how people are paid their social security. Often people request that kind of approach so that they can manage their money properly. They are doing the right thing in acknowledging that they might have issues, but they are not being aided by the technology. As the hon. Member for Motherwell and Wishaw (Marion Fellows) said, it is often the most technologically literate who have the greatest resources and can make use of technological innovations. That needs to be accelerated, but we also need to acknowledge that although technology can empower, it can discriminate as well.

I have had discussions with people involved with the Money and Mental Health Policy Institute, who have pointed out that although it is possible to use people’s financial transactions to pinpoint and identify vulnerability, such information could be used to ration services and access, as well as to facilitate them. If it is used, for example, to take people to a pop-up chat with an adviser, who can say, “Are you sure this is what you want to be doing? Can I help you?” that is fine, but if it makes it harder for people with mental illness to access services that we benefit from, that is inappropriate.

The report rightly focuses on access for vulnerable groups, such as elderly and disabled people, and on a number of risks that technology can embed, which result in people being unable to access the most basic financial services. In many cases, that is getting worse because of issues such as the use of touch-screen technology, which was mentioned earlier, and the speed at which high street banks are closing. I will come back to that point later.

The report contains useful recommendations about vulnerable people’s access to financial services. I support the recommendation that the Financial Conduct Authority should consult on how power of attorney works in relation to financial services. If that is done properly with appropriate safeguards, it could improve the situation for many carers and those they care for. The discussion in the report about that is very helpful.

The discussion in the report about the Equality Act 2010 is very useful. The Labour party is committed to strengthening the Act and other anti-discrimination law. There is clear evidence, which is repeated in the report, that it is not being complied with in a number of areas, and that is simply unacceptable. The exchange between the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), who is no longer in his place, and the right hon. Member for Loughborough was very instructive in that regard. I am sure that every Member in this Chamber has a whole bag of cases involving people with various vulnerabilities who have not been treated in the way that we would expect. That has to end, because it is discrimination.

The report touches on issues relating to low-income households at various points. The discussion of the loyalty penalty was very interesting. Citizens Advice’s work shows that the average consumer pays up to £1,000 per year more because of the loyalty penalty. That is clearly totally unacceptable. The Competition and Markets Authority noted that people on low incomes are much more at risk of paying the loyalty penalty. For people in the bottom 10% of income, it could account for up to 8% of their spending.

The CMA’s recommendation about transparency is welcome. There should be more accountability. Regulators should publish the size of the loyalty penalty in key markets and for different firms annually, but as the report states, just informing the public about the loyalty penalty for each firm is not enough. It is clear that regulators currently have little ability to protect customer interests in that respect, so we need to focus on that much more strongly. The time is right to reform the
The points that the hon. Member for Motherwell and Wishaw made about access to cash were very relevant. Even with the current standards, we all know from our constituencies and elsewhere that there are pockets where access to cash is not available. It tends to be in areas where people have low spending power and are incredibly reliant on cash that there is not the provision that we expect.

The report did not examine the relationship between poverty and financial exclusion, as the 2017 report by the Financial Exclusion Committee in the other place did. I completely understand that the Treasury Committee had a slightly different focus. It would be useful to look at that issue in more detail, because in the Financial Exclusion Committee report, Gingerbread reported that single parents and low-income households often find that they are disproportionately excluded from financial services. Lower-income people often pay much more for financial services, compared with those with greater incomes. The Child Poverty Action Group said that that is the case, despite the fact that most low-income households manage their limited resources well. We are often told that the answer for people with few resources is to manage their money better. Well, many of them are extremely good at doing that already, and I was very pleased that the right hon. Member for Motherwell and Wishaw confirmed that. The Lords report also looked at the so-called poverty premium and how it exacerbates the effects of financial exclusion. It is important that we bear that in mind and continue to look at it.

Problems in accessing lower-cost credit primarily affect low-income households, and it is good that the report looked at that in detail. It praised the Government for their proposed pilot of a no-interest loan scheme in the 2018 Budget, but that arguably does not go far enough in tackling consumer debt. We still do not have a clear timetable for when that measure will be implemented. The Labour party and I believe that it is essential to go further. For example, we should cap the total amount that a person can pay in bank overdraft fees and interest payments on credit card debt. People who get caught by overdraft fees often use other forms of credit to pay it off because it is such an expensive debt and is extremely bad for them.

It is unfortunate that the Government have not really grasped the issues relating to debt enforcement. That is becoming more of an issue in many parts of the country, particularly given changes to the withdrawal of funds for council tax relief. Individuals are now being pursued for small amounts of money in many parts of the country, particularly given changes to the withdrawal of funds for council tax relief. The report did not examine the relationship between poverty and financial exclusion, as the 2017 report by the Financial Exclusion Committee in the other place did. I completely understand that the Treasury Committee had a slightly different focus. It would be useful to look at that issue in more detail, because in the Financial Exclusion Committee report, Gingerbread reported that single parents and low-income households often find that they are disproportionately excluded from financial services. Lower-income people often pay much more for financial services, compared with those with greater incomes. The Child Poverty Action Group said that that is the case, despite the fact that most low-income households manage their limited resources well. We are often told that the answer for people with few resources is to manage their money better. Well, many of them are extremely good at doing that already, and I was very pleased that the right hon.

The report also examines the issue of those who are unable to access affordable credit because they lack a credit history. We believe that the Government’s approach so far has been inadequate. Obviously, there has been the pilot, and they have tried to get the private sector to take this forward. We need to have more of a discussion about how to ensure that people can build up a credit history. I hope the Treasury Committee will continue to do that, but the discussion in the report was useful.

Let me move on to the post bank and bank branch closures. The Labour party is looking at research that we commissioned on how the post bank approach can be revitalised and how we can ensure that it provides good quality services that are good for both the Post Office and local communities. We think it could be possible to do that on the basis of the research that we commissioned. There could be 3,600 additional post bank branches, compared with what we have currently. That would help communities that are currently struggling with access to banking facilities, and in many cases would also help high streets. We think that using and building on the existing infrastructure is probably the most sensible way forward. This is not about tweaking; it must be more fundamental. We cannot just load more activities on to already pressed postmasters. The comments of the hon. Member for Gordon (Colin Clark) were useful in that regard. This is not just about the post office network; we need other reforms elsewhere in the financial ecosystem, and we must also focus on the behaviour of the big banks. I concur with many of the comments of the hon. Member for Motherwell and Wishaw in that regard.

I want to talk a bit about the policy process in this area—in particular, the perils of not having a strong focus on implementation, and the initial legislation. The basic bank account legislation initially arose out of the EU payment accounts directive. Research conducted by Citizens Advice shows that, in practice, basic accounts are often still not very visible to consumers who might want to use them. Banks’ processes for determining what kind of account to give people rely too much on credit checks, and applying for a basic account is still too difficult for many people. The Committee recommended that the FCA should mandate banks to relax the restrictions on basic bank accounts and make them available to all—that is very sensible—and that it should require financial services to report how many basic current account openings they have rejected. That would be very helpful.

One particular problem that I have come across is that many of the most vulnerable and most excluded customers are informed that they cannot have a basic bank account because there has previously been some indication of fraud related to their financial activity, but no evidence of that has to be provided. In many cases, that fraud could be due to manipulation by others—for example, if people have been subject to domestic violence—or it could be because people had been addicted to substances and previously led chaotic lifestyles that are now behind them. Christians Against Poverty is concerned about that; it needs to be looked into and I hope the Government will do so.

We need a much stronger focus on the issue of access to financial services. We have mainly talked about access to basic banking—the Committee has a lot on its plate, so I do not want to suggest that it should deal with even
more—but the savings infrastructure is another area in which there have been some worrying developments. Some 57% of UK adults do not have savings beyond £5,000. Help to Save was an interesting idea but it has not yet had the traction that many of us would have hoped. We still urge the Government to try to incorporate the credit union sector more closely with that initiative, and I hope that in future, the Government will view credit unions much more as part of the solution to many of the problems than they have in the past.

Nicky Morgan: I thank the hon. Lady for the many points that she is making. Did she, too, pick up Scope’s briefing for the debate, which makes the point that disabled people have an average of £108,000 less in savings and assets than non-disabled people? That is quite a staggering amount of money.

The Committee looked at household savings and debt last year. We might have a little issue with our agenda at the moment, but I take her invitation to perhaps return to that at some point.

Anneliese Dodds: I am very grateful to the right hon. Lady for raising that point. That is a staggering statistic, which is due to a whole range of factors: the support that people receive, their ability to participate in the labour market, and the savings infrastructure. She raises an important point: people living with a disability are very often at much greater risk of needing to tap into savings at different points, particularly when, sadly, many sources of support for doing things such as home alterations have dried up. It is really important that we listen to Scope about that.

We must also acknowledge that the ride has been bumpy and we are not moving forward in every area as we would want to. Research from the Friends Provident Foundation and the University of Birmingham suggests that in 2006-07 there were just over 1 million people with no household bank account access, and although that number fell to 660,000 in 2012-13, the trend was reversed in 2013-14 when the number rose again to 730,000. We need to understand what is not right here, and I hope that in future, the Government will view the credit union sector more closely with that initiative, which has not yet had the traction that many of us would have hoped.

Mr Charles Walker (in the Chair): Minister, if you are inclined to speak until 3 o’clock, please do not, and allow two minutes for the right hon. Member for Loughborough (Nicky Morgan) to respond.

2.23 pm

The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury (Robert Jenrick): Thank you, Mr Walker; it is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship. I do not intend to use up all the time, unless there are many interventions from colleagues. It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Motherwell and Wishaw (Marion Fellows) and for Oxford East (Anneliese Dodds). A dangerous precedent was set in the Lords by my colleague, the noble Lord Bates, who resigned after arriving 10 seconds late to a debate, so I am always careful to be on time now, although I am sure being 15 seconds late is allowed.

I thank both the Treasury Committee and its chair, my right hon. Friend the Member for Loughborough (Nicky Morgan), for securing the debate and for this important piece of work. As she knows, this debate comes just a few weeks before the Treasury will formally respond to the Committee’s comments and recommendations on behalf of the Government. I hope that she will forgive me for not pre-empting that by providing the full formal response, but I will try to set out our approach, our record in recent years and some further steps that we intend to take, as well as impress on her how seriously the Government take the issue and how carefully we will read and respond to the important recommendations in her Committee’s report.

Financial inclusion is a priority for this Government and has been for some time, particularly, as I hope my right hon. Friend will recognise, over the last two or three years, when in each successive Budget the Government have taken a number of important steps to address some of the issues that the report raises and on which it urges us to go much further. Like my right hon. Friend and others who have spoken, I think that financial inclusion is extremely important to build a unified society and economy. In her introduction, she made the important point that we have to take a wide view of what “vulnerability” means, because each and every one of us can be vulnerable at different stages in our lives, not just those whom one might stereotypically assume to be vulnerable.

That is reflected in the broad definition of “vulnerability” that the FCA is working towards. It has identified four indicators of potential vulnerability: low financial capability, low financial resilience, life events, which of course can happen to all of us, and physical and mental health conditions, which one might most clearly recognise as vulnerability. The Government, like the regulator, view this issue with the broadest possible definition.

I will say a few words on what we have done most recently. In November 2017, following a report from the Lords Financial Exclusion Committee, which the hon. Member for Oxford East mentioned, the Government announced the creation of the financial inclusion policy forum. The forum has now met three times and has successfully brought together for the first time the key leaders from across the industry, charities—including some of those mentioned today—and consumer groups, as well as Ministers from throughout Government and the regulators, to provide the leadership and co-ordination in tackling financial exclusion that the issue demands. The Government published our first financial inclusion report on 25 March this year, which takes stock of progress in the area. We intend to continue doing so annually.

Affordable credit was one of the core areas of the report. The policy forum is widely recognised by the sector as an important initiative and it has already managed to deliver tangible progress, although I hope it will go further in the months and years to come. A sub-group of the forum that was set up last summer to examine the issues of access to affordable credit made a number of recommendations. To build on that work, at last year’s Budget we announced a package of affordable
credit measures aimed at supporting the affordable credit sector and offering more choice and a better deal to consumers who struggle to access mainstream credit.

Some of those measures have already been referenced in this debate. They include a £2 million affordable credit challenge fund, harnessing the UK’s undoubtedly great capability in the FinTech sector to address the specific challenges faced by social and community lenders. The Government have appointed Nesta as the delivery partner to run the challenge fund, and we expect to launch it in the summer—so, in the coming weeks.

Other measures include a change in the regulatory boundary of credit broking, to allow registered social landlords to refer their tenants to social and community lenders; a pilot prize-linked savings scheme to encourage the growth of the credit union sector and to encourage consumers to build up their personal savings, which we readily acknowledge are lower than most of us would like to see; and a feasibility study to design a pilot for a UK no-interest loans scheme, which we have already heard about. That scheme will be aimed at helping those at the margins of the financial system, for whom borrowing from social and community lenders can still be unaffordable. The Government have appointed London Economics, which is undertaking the study and will report back this summer. Depending on the results, we will then move quickly into the pilot design phase and then to implementation.

The Government are also directing an initial £55 million of dormant assets funding towards financial inclusion, primarily to address affordable credit. That will be deployed by a new, independent organisation, Fair4All Finance, which was launched in February. We are pleased with the rapid progress that it is making, and excited to see it begin work with a range of partners to tackle financial exclusion, but clearly there is more to be done.

We heard some comments about basic bank accounts. We think, as right hon. and hon. Members here do, that they play an important role. I will take away the comments from the hon. Member for Oxford East about access to and knowledge of those bank accounts. A large number of people benefit from them. The last report that we received, published in December 2018, found that almost 7.5 million basic bank accounts were open at that time, deployed through the nine designated institutions. The banks that are required to provide basic bank accounts send reports to the Treasury, so we receive accurate information, but we could perhaps do more to monitor those banks’ activities and ensure that they are more visible to potential customers, particularly the most vulnerable. I will take away the hon. Lady’s comments in that regard.

The report made a number of recommendations on safeguarding access to cash. The Government recognise that the use of digital payment is growing very fast—among the fastest of any major economy: in Europe, only a few Nordic countries are moving to a more cashless society at a faster pace than our own. Although we acknowledge the many benefits for consumers and the economy, there is and will continue to be for many years to come—almost certainly throughout our lifetimes—a need for cash and traditional face-to-face methods of banking to continue alongside the new thriving digital economy. Running both the digital and the cash systems side by side in all parts of the country and for all consumers, including the most vulnerable, will be a considerable challenge to us as Government and policy makers in the years ahead, but one that we must meet.

We have set up the joint authority cash strategy group, which responds directly to one of the report’s recommendations. It 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. That will complement the Bank of England’s work to reform the wholesale cash industry, to encourage innovation and guarantee resilience even in a much lower cash usage environment. The organisation has already started work, and I am happy to update the Committee and other interested Members in the month ahead as we develop this area of work.

Industry has played a central role, and will have one in future, to maintain access to cash, because with industry innovation we can do more at a lower cost. I was pleased to meet Natalie Ceeney recently to discuss the findings of her excellent Access to Cash review, which showed that creative industry initiatives are already being developed, including encouraging greater use of cashback. We think that the industry, perhaps with Government help, can do more to encourage a resurgence in cashback, which was prevalent but is somewhat less so today. It could be part of the answer where ATMs are in decline. There might be opportunities for smaller shops such as convenience stores to return to offering cashback if they have stopped doing so. We would like to take that forward in future.

We have heard about ATMs, where there is undoubtedly a challenge. There remains a large network of free ATMs in this country—among the largest of any developed country in the world. In 2017, the number of free ATMs in the country reached its peak at 54,500, many of which were clustered in the wrong places, particularly in urban areas with the highest footfall. Since then the number has declined. Even though there might be a logical case for reducing the number of ATMs in areas with high footfall, where they are in less demand as more of us use contactless and digital payments, we want to ensure that we protect the people who live in harder-to-serve areas.

The number of ATM transactions is falling by around 6% year on year. Demand is reducing but it varies quite significantly in different parts of the country, as the hon. Member for Motherwell and Wishaw suggested. The last figures show that there was a 10% reduction in the use of ATMs in London, but the figure was as low as 2% in areas such as the east midlands, which my right hon. Friend the Member for Loughborough and I represent, and in Northern Ireland. There are large variations by region, age and socio-economic group. We need to pay careful attention to that. The LINK organisation has made an important commitment to maintain a good and appropriate geographical representation of ATMs, and a particular commitment that we intend to hold it to: that if the last ATM in one kilometre closes and no alternative is provided by the local post office in that radius, it will continue to seek an alternative location for an ATM and will use the subsidies that it provides without limit until an alternative is found. That is an important commitment, and we all need to hold LINK to account. I assure the Committee...
and colleagues here that I will play my role in doing that, as will my colleague, the Economic Secretary to the Treasury.

Post offices play a key role. They provide a good range of banking services—not a complete range, but most of the services that individuals and smaller businesses will require. Although the number of post offices continues to decline, it is more stable than it has been for a long time. There are 11,500 branches across the country, and we will continue to do all we can to support them. My hon. Friend the Member for Gordon (Colin Clark), who is no longer in the debate, raised the important question of fees for services that banks provide to those running post offices. There has been a negotiation that has led to a significant increase in the amount of money that banks pay of between two and three times the amount of money that post offices receive for offering those services. I am very alive to that issue and the need of those running post offices, often on low margins and taking very little money out of their business, to receive fair compensation for their work.

The wider question of digital inclusion, which the hon. Member for Motherwell and Wishaw raised, is very important. Although younger people and perhaps those in this debate enjoy using digital payments, people have to be able to use digital services and live in areas with 5G or broadband to access them. In rural areas, that is not always the case, although there have been great steps forward. We are alive to that issue and we are working on our digital strategy as a country to ensure that more people have access to basic digital training. Through education we are taking steps in that regard. We should recognise that some new products coming out of the FinTech sector will be very useful to those who have the digital skills to access them, whether that is income smoothing, budgeting skills or the ability to share payments and bills among flatmates. They will make life much easier, but that is dependent on having the digital skills to access those services.

Financial guidance is not limited to digital skills. Last year, we established a new single financial guidance body, the Money and Pensions Service—MAPS—by merging three existing bodies: Pension Wise, the Pensions Advisory Service and the Money Advice Service. The new body provides money guidance for members of the public at every stage of their financial journey. The Government’s commitment to improve people’s financial capability and the provision of financial education is reflected in MAPS’s strategic function to develop and co-ordinate a national strategy that will build on and further progress the Money Advice Service’s work on financial capability.

It is particularly important that children and young people receive good-quality financial education to help them to shape their financial habits later in life. That is why financial literacy was made statutory in the national curriculum in England in 2014, which my right hon. Friend the Member for Loughborough asked particular questions about the duty of care. We will give that careful thought and respond in a couple of weeks’ time, as we will to her comments about the Equality Act. Those were very important questions. We will give more thought to them and respond to her, I hope in the next few weeks.

We all agree that access to useful and affordable financial products and services is essential to individuals, regardless of their background or income. Part of this is about ensuring that financial services are inclusive to all customers and protecting those who are financially vulnerable by making the right products and advice available. The banks are taking steps in that regard. I met the staff at my local bank in Newark last Friday and saw the quality of training that that bank, Lloyds, provides to protect vulnerable people, such as those who suffer from dementia and those at risk of scams, including new ones emerging as a result of the new digital economy. However, there is a great deal more that the sector and the Government can do.

The Government’s response to the Treasury Committee’s report will be published in the coming weeks. We will seek to address in detail all the recommendations that my right hon. Friend and her Committee made and outline the steps that we will take to build on the progress made on access to financial services. I thank the hon. Member who took part in the debate, and I thank my right hon. Friend for another interesting and rigorous report with insightful recommendations, on which I hope we can work together.
Nicky Morgan: I thank all the Members who attended the debate, including those who only intervened, and I thank the Minister for his thoughtful response. When a Treasury Committee report is described by the relevant Department as “interesting”, I hope that means that we have struck a chord somewhere along the way.

Members generously shared examples of financial exclusion and the importance of financial inclusion. I say to the Minister that, at a time when the House sometimes appears to struggle to find enough business to fill its day, this may well be an area in which there can be good cross-party agreement and working. If there is a need for changes to regulations or legislation, or for the House to show regulators and others that this issue is of great concern to us, this may be a good time to take advantage of that.

I will not go through everything the Minister said. He is absolutely right that the Financial Conduct Authority is very important in this area. We recognise that. On access to cash, the other issue is the cash infrastructure—the way that cash moves around the country. Sweden in particular has found that once that infrastructure has gone, it is difficult and expensive to bring it back. The Minister also talked about ATMs and post offices. He is right that FinTech offers opportunities for innovation in things such as budgeting. That is fantastic, but we want those things to be used by our large banks, many of which have millions of customer accounts, not just our small, innovative challenger banks and FinTech companies.

We wait to hear the Government’s response about the duty of care and the enforcement of the Equality and Human Rights Commission’s powers in relation to the Equality Act, and I am sure we all look forward to seeing the breathing space regulations. The hon. Member for Oxford East (Anneliese Dodds) mentioned the wording of consumer credit letters where debts are being chased. That has already been raised in this Chamber, and it is another area where I think there is general agreement.

Of course, Ministers can always speak directly to financial services providers. Yes, there is the raised eyebrow of the Governor of the Bank of England, but there is nothing like the raised eyebrow of Ministers. I am delighted to hear that the Minister visited a bank in his constituency to hear about the training it offers to protect customers with dementia.

Mr Charles Walker (in the Chair): Let me conclude by saying to the hon. Member for Motherwell and Wishaw (Marion Fellows) that she was actually in the room, if not in her seat, at the start of the debate, and she knows full well that in this place it is being in the room that counts.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the Twenty-ninth Report of the Treasury Committee, Consumers’ access to financial services, HC 1642.

2.46 pm

Sitting suspended.
to the crash, he had driven 62 hours, 76 hours, 76 hours and 72 hours respectively, which was an average of 72 hours a week over that period. That was despite his shocking safety record and some 16 written complaints from passengers, who, over the preceding couple of years, had contacted the company to register his erratic behaviour and innumerable incidents. Those hours are entirely legal under current UK law, and that is what many of us are seeking to address.

This issue is not new, and the crash in 2015 could have been prevented. Back in March that year, before the tragedy, my right hon. Friends the Members for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn), and for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell), proposed such changes through an early-day motion. That was four years ago. Currently, British laws limit bus drivers’ hours on local routes of less than 50 km to 10 hours of driving a day, with no weekly or fortnightly limit, except that in any two consecutive weeks there must be at least one period of 24 hours off duty. That means it is entirely legal for a local bus driver to drive 130 hours over two weeks. If you extrapolate that, a driver could work 260 hours in under four weeks, which would be extraordinary.

Under EU law, a long-distance bus or lorry driver cannot drive for more than 56 hours a week, or more than 90 hours over two consecutive weeks. I believe this tragedy could have been avoided if driving hours for local bus drivers had been capped at 56 hours a week, and no more than 90 hours over two consecutive weeks, as is already the case for long-distance bus and HGV drivers.

When the family and I met the Minister, just a month ago, she shared with us Department for Transport data that showed that bus drivers drive an average of 42 hours a week. I believe that hides the reality and what is happening at the extreme margins. It is reported that 10,000 bus or coach drivers are working in excess of 56 hours a week, and that 42,000 drivers—some 40% of total drivers—are working in excess of 90 hours per fortnight on average.

Part of the issue is that drivers are seeking recompense for depressed earnings; they have seen their wages reduce, relative to other drivers, such as train or tube train drivers. That divergence, where there was once parity, is a great cause of the additional hours that have been worked. It means that on average bus drivers work nearly six hours per week more than average workers.

The Bill proposes moving to EU regulations that cover total hours worked, but also includes proposals to bring changes to mandatory breaks that would ensure a break of no less than 45 minutes would be taken after no more than four and a half hours of driving. At present, the entitlement to a 30-minute break after five and a half hours behind the wheel often results in drivers taking smaller breaks or none at all due to congestion on the route or other factors beyond their control. It is not realistic to think that a driver can obtain proper rest and refreshment in that timeframe, after five and a half hours of driving passengers on often complicated routes, with frequent stopping.

Importantly, the changes to hours in the Bill should be introduced by employers at no detriment to bus drivers’ pay. The culture of long hours amongst bus drivers is accompanied by low rates of pay, which places on drivers a dubious incentive to work overtime. Regulations must prevent this, but must also ensure that bus drivers are paid properly for the essential public service they provide. This is important at a time when operators are cutting unprofitable routes and local councils are cutting funding to bus services. This all sounds obvious, particularly when looking at the regulations that apply in other European countries, but it is why so many of us are calling for change. I applaud Rowan’s family for their petition doing just that. It already has 2,800 signatures, mostly local, but I am sure the number will build as this campaign makes further headway.

Since I spoke to my ten-minute rule Bill, the family and I met with the Minister responsible for buses, who disappointingly cannot be here today. It was an emotional meeting. The Minister said she would look into this; I appreciate her honesty and her commitment to doing that. I have met representatives of the relevant unions to garner their views. The TUC, GMB and National Union of Rail, Maritime and Transport Workers all back this change, as does the Mayor of Greater Manchester. I met those responsible at Transport for London to hear their concerns, and to try to better understand the reasons behind the 16 or 17 deaths per year, on average, involving buses on the capital’s streets.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): The accident happened in my constituency; I thought it only right and proper to come along today to support my hon. Friend. The accident is a by-product of deregulation about 30 years ago. I am surprised that the Government have never adopted the EU regulations. I support my hon. Friend and I extend every sympathy to the families of those killed in the accident. I hope that the Government will, for a change, take action, rather than drag this out so that, at the end of the day, nothing changes. That would be no comfort to the families concerned. Earlier this year, I met my hon. Friend and members of the victims’ families right here in Westminster Hall. We support them all that we can. I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this debate.

Matt Western: Thank you, my hon. Friend for his intervention. I agree with him entirely about the marketisation of the bus sector, and the pressures that that has put on bus drivers and the hours that they work, and the pay and working conditions that they suffer as a result. Of course, that does not apply to tube drivers, for whom that has not been allowed to happen. We have seen widening divergence in tube driver and bus driver pay in the capital; it is a good example of what has been allowed to happen through marketisation of local bus services. I thank my hon. Friend for coming today. I know that many others hoped to be here, and were it not for the by-election in Peterborough, I am sure a great many more would have been here. Unfortunately, that is just a scheduling problem.

When I met Brake, the road safety charity, it was extremely impressed by the campaign and put its full support behind it, as did London Bus Watch. Sir Graham, you will not be surprised to learn that many bus drivers have approached me to share their stories and the reality of what is happening under existing legislation. Across the country, their responses have been clear and consistent. For example, a bus driver in Cornwall drives on a route longer than 50 km, so it should come under...
strict EU rules for long-distance drivers, but the local company exploits a loophole and splits the route into three, so that the same driver can continue the route and they do not have to comply with EU working hours restrictions—a simple example of how companies work the system. In Liverpool, a driver who used to work for Stagecoach said that drivers were regularly forced to work 12-hour shifts day after day, which caused fatigue. There are many other examples, but time does not permit me to give them.

There is also concern about who enforces legislation. What are the roles, and how are the Driver and Vehicle Standards Agency and the traffic commissioners resourced? It is disturbing, and may come as a surprise, that very few councils and local authorities have any bus safety data at all. Following a Freedom of Information Act application by one of the campaign groups, 46 of the 74 councils and local authorities approached said they had absolutely no bus safety data; eight said they did, and 24 are yet to respond. There is clearly much to do.

It is evident that what happened on that day in Coventry city centre could have happened anywhere, and it is unlikely to be the last such accident. In fact, what motivates me, and, I am sure, Rowan’s family, is our determination to ensure that there is no repeat of the Coventry crash, and that no worse tragedy ever occurs. I fear it is simply a matter of time unless the Government act.

I sum up by repeating that it is simply common sense to align the working hours legislation for local bus drivers with that for long-distance bus, coach and lorry drivers to bring safety to our streets, and to avoid an even more serious tragedy, but that must not impact on drivers’ pay. That is sensible, pragmatic and certainly not radical. We need only look at the legislation and what happens in Germany and the Netherlands, where daily driving cannot exceed nine hours, with an exemption twice a week, when it can be increased to 10 hours. Total driving time is limited to 56 hours a week, with a total fortnightly limit of 90 hours, and drivers have 45-minute breaks after four and a half hours of driving time. That is what happens in other European countries.

We must also introduce independent, regular health checks. Coventry was an example of an individual being suspected of being in ill health, but for some reason, that was not exposed, though it should have been. Through the Bill, I urge the Minister to provide for more regular, independent health checks to ensure the safety of all our passengers and other road users. That could be introduced via a simple statutory instrument, if the Government so wished. I urge the Minister to review the matter with his colleague and the Secretary of State. In the meantime, the family and I will continue to press for the introduction of Rowan’s law. We have come a long way, but we will continue until Rowan’s legacy is fulfilled.

3.14 pm

Jim Fitzpatrick (Poplar and Limehouse) (Lab): It is a pleasure to see you presiding in the Chair this afternoon, Sir Graham. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Warwick and Leamington (Matt Western) on securing this important debate. I commend him not only for his excellent contribution, but for his campaigning on this issue, including his ten-minute rule Bill, which he introduced on 13 February, as he mentioned in his remarks.

I had hoped to welcome the new Minister of State, Department for Transport, the hon. Member for Northampton North (Michael Ellis), who has responsibility for road safety, to his place. I am never unhappy to see the Under-Secretary of State for Transport, the hon. Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough (Andrew Jones), but it would have been nice to be able to firmly welcome the new road safety Minister. As chair of the all-party group for transport safety, I was hoping to get an assurance from him that he would engage with the all-party group as much as his predecessor did, so I hope the Minister will take that message back to the hon. Member for Northampton North.

Will the Minister also pass on a message about the updated road safety statement, which he knows has been long awaited? I hope the reshuffle will not delay it, given the concern about how the road safety casualty figures on those who have been killed or seriously injured have stagnated over the past few years. It would be an impetus to getting those figures on a downward trend again, which we all want to see.

My hon. Friend the Member for Warwick and Leamington highlighted the crystal clear anomaly between the permitted hours of driving for HGV drivers, long-distance bus drivers and local bus drivers—a point also made by the RMT trade union in its briefing. I thank the union, the Parliamentary Advisory Council for Transport Safety and the Library for their information and briefings for this debate.

The Rowan Fitzgerald case cited by my hon. Friend graphically and tragically portrays the problem, and I offer my sincere condolences to the family. Long driving hours were a key cause of the death of seven-year-old Rowan. It is well documented that fatigue causes crashes. According to the Parliamentary Advisory Council for Transport Safety’s most recent figures, 62 people died in collisions where fatigue was recorded as a contributory factor and a further 509 were seriously injured, so fatigue is a major problem. Public sector staff have a responsibility for public safety. It is for local government and the Government to monitor how best to protect the public in these situations.

When one is driving a vehicle the size of a local bus, whether single or double-decker, regulations should protect passengers, other road users, pedestrians and the driver himself or herself. My hon. Friend put two cases: first, local bus drivers’ hours should be capped at 56 hours per week or 90 in a fortnight; and secondly, we should match European Union employment regulations. The fact that drivers are expected to drive for up to five and a half hours without a break under the existing regulations is absurd in this day and age.

I will not detail the specifics of the Coventry crash that killed Rowan and Mrs Dora Hancox; they have been well documented and the court has pronounced its verdict. Cause, effect, responsibility and blame are all indisputable. The financial penalty is significant, but, given the loss of life and serious injury caused, I am sure the victims and the families were not happy with just that outcome. A more significant conclusion would be for the Government to recognise that fatigue for that class of driver can be addressed and reduced so that we can prevent more deaths and serious injuries. It is within the gift of the Government to introduce the type of regulations that my hon. Friend mentioned.
Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Graham. I am delighted to take part in this interesting debate, introduced by the hon. Member for Warwick and Leamington (Matt Western). I pay tribute to his work on this issue, and I wish him every success with his private Member’s Bill.

I thank the hon. Gentleman for his account of the tragedy that took place in Coventry. The hours worked in that case were truly shocking. Perhaps even more shocking is that those hours are perfectly legal. I also thank him for raising the splitting of routes to avoid the 50 km long-distance requirements. That is unacceptable, and I am grateful to him for mentioning that today. The hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick) highlighted how fatigue causes crashes, and I could not agree more. I am grateful to him for the statistics he used to illustrate that point.

The Scottish National party has been a powerful advocate for fair working hours and working practices, so it will come as absolutely no surprise that I fully support the change being sought. A limit of 56 hours in a week or 90 hours over two weeks seems perfectly reasonable. In fact, I would not want to be driving for that many hours. I certainly would not want to see someone driving the hours they are driving now on local routes. I fail to see why any difference between the working hours of local bus drivers, long-distance bus drivers and HGV drivers should exist, other than it being an accidental mismatch from historical pieces of legislation. The average driver’s hours are 42 a week, which suggests that there would not be insurmountable problems for bus companies in facilitating a more respectable number of hours. It certainly would not put people out of work.

In saying that, I should point out that the SNP supports the full devolution of employment law to the Scottish Parliament. We do not have control over that, so the debate is particularly relevant for me, as it allows me to make these points. In Scotland, we have control over transport policy, and we have tried to prioritise the provision of quality bus services. In general, we believe that the current model for providing bus services, where public authorities have the power to intervene, including through subsidies, is generally the right one. However, we need to do more. That is why we are trying to strengthen the powers through our Transport (Scotland) Bill to allow transport authorities to run their own services in some cases, or to take over whole networks or parts of areas. In that melting pot, it would make great sense for Scotland to have control over the hours drivers may work. That would assist us in boosting public confidence in the safety of the service, which is a point I am happy to make here, as this Parliament has that power just now.

Another area of concern is that many of the protections and rights secured for our workers have flowed directly from our membership of the European Union. It is imperative that those are not put at risk by any Brexit race to the bottom. It is worth pointing out that the UK rules on drivers’ hours are slightly different from the EU’s. Under UK rules, after 5.5 hours of driving, a break of 30 minutes must be taken. Under the equivalent EU rules, a driving period of no more than 4.5 hours gives drivers a break of 45 minutes. I am not a professional driver or a professional transport person, but on the few occasions when I have had the misfortune of having to drive from my constituency to London—a journey that took me longer than 5.5 hours—I needed a considerably longer break. I say that as someone who is not regularly driving every day. While I may not be a professional driver, starting from a more relaxed position and coming out severely fatigued would worry me from my personal experience.

In conclusion, I hope the Minister will look favourably at addressing drivers’ hours and breaks. The hon. Member for Warwick and Leamington has highlighted a good issue. I support him and wish him every success. Can the Minister tell me what the rationale is for continuing to have different working hours for local and long-distance drivers? It certainly is not safety, and I fail to see any logic for it.

Matt Rodda (Reading East) (Lab): I am grateful to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Graham, and to have the opportunity to speak in this important debate. Today’s debate about bus safety is happening in response to the most terrible tragedy, when, as we have heard, Rowan died in a horrific accident at just seven years old. Dora Hancox also died, and many others were injured. I want to pass on my condolences to Rowan’s family; to his mother, Natasha; his grandmother, Barbara; and their relatives. They have been through the most unimaginable suffering and the loss of a much-loved young son.

No family should have to endure what these families have been through. It is essential that we now listen to the families and understand what they have suffered to help ensure that a tragedy like this never, ever happens again. That requires determined action and investment by the Government, working with the bus industry, trade unions and passengers to look again at the problem of excessive working hours.

Before I discuss how safety can be improved, I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Warwick and Leamington (Matt Western) for his campaigning work on behalf of Dora and Rowan’s families and for securing this debate.
as part of the campaign to improve bus safety. I thank other hon. Members for speaking today, and I look forward to the Minister addressing the points I will raise.

Labour believes that safety should always come first, and we want to see a culture of improved safety across our entire transport system. That clearly means setting higher safety standards and investing more in road safety, in the safety of our bus services and in other modes of transport.

I want to address the importance of setting higher standards of safety first, before discussing the wider issue of investment. It is clear that there is a considerable difference between the regulation of coach drivers’ hours and the more limited regulation of local bus drivers’ hours. The regulations regarding bus drivers’ hours need to be reviewed in light of the tragedy, as was mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Warwick and Leamington. I call on the Government to work with operators, unions and passengers, and to support his Bill.

There needs to be a thorough review, considering the issue from first principles, rather than merely tinkering with the problem. As part of that, it is important to consider the wide range of factors that could affect drivers and lead to a loss of concentration, including fatigue, their underlying health, their age, driver training and the use of any safety devices in cabs. It is important that those issues are considered thoroughly in response to this tragedy.

Turning to the wider issue of the need for investment in the bus industry to improve safety, there has been a 45% cut in Government funding for buses since 2010 and a fall in bus usage across the country. I am concerned that the decline in services and the pressure on drivers and operators contributed to the terrible accident in which Rowan tragically lost his life. Investment will save lives by reducing accidents in the short term and by cutting long-term damage from things such as air pollution, which can threaten health.

As a party, we see improvements to safety as integral to the wider package of investment. That is a proven approach, and there is a long history of investment in transport infrastructure, better pay, better training and improved regulation of services all leading to improvements in safety. As part of that, Labour would reinstate the services cut by the present Government. We would also allow all councils to regulate services and, indeed, to set up new municipal bus companies, which have a record of providing much better quality services than those run by private companies. Those measures for buses would be part of a much wider range of investments to improve our whole transport system.

Our party’s programme is in stark contrast to the current state of bus services, where there is declining bus use, endemic low pay among drivers and a shortage of drivers. If the Government want to improve safety, they need to reconsider their approach and acknowledge the dangerous effects of the cuts that have led to this accident and other problems in the service.

I am conscious of time, and I will sum up my remarks by making the following points. Rowan and Dora’s families have suffered the most terrible tragedy, and I hope we can all agree that no family should have to suffer as they have. Urgent action is now quite clearly needed. A Government review of drivers’ hours, supporting my hon. Friend’s Bill and working with operators, unions and passengers are important ways of addressing the problem. There needs to be investment, not cuts, in bus services. All those measures together are vital for improvements in safety.

3.28 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Andrew Jones): It is always a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Graham, and I congratulate the hon. Member for Warwick and Leamington (Matt Western) on having secured this debate about local bus drivers’ working hours. I should probably also start with an apology: I am not the bus Minister. My hon. Friend the Member for Wealden (Ms Ghani) is away on an overseas ministerial visit, which is why I am covering for her in today’s debate. However, I understand that she has been very engaged with this issue and met the hon. Member for Warwick and Leamington, together with the family of Rowan, to discuss it on 7 May. She has promised to look into the concerns raised; she is doing so, and she will write back to the family through the hon. Gentleman very shortly.

Before turning to some of the issues, let me join colleagues in paying tribute to Rowan’s family for their work. I must say that it is astonishingly brave, when something must be acutely painful, to draw something so positive from it by campaigning to see that other families do not have to suffer as they have suffered. That is noble and brave work, and we as a House should recognise it.

The Government are committed to ensuring that the bus industry complies with the current law, including its duty of care to passengers. As promised, my hon. Friend the Member for Wealden will press that with the industry at every opportunity. We all agree that the tragic accident that occurred in 2015 in Coventry should never have happened and must never be allowed to happen again.

However, the Government are not convinced that amending the local drivers’ hours legislation is the answer. A number of pieces of legislation already exist to regulate the bus industry, which together should have stopped this tragic accident happening. It might be helpful if I detail some of those.

There is a general duty of care under the Public Service Vehicles (Conduct of Drivers, Inspectors, Conductors and Passengers) Regulations 1990, which set standards for bus companies and their drivers, to ensure safety for their passengers. The GB domestic drivers, hours rules in the Transport Act 1968 limit bus drivers to 10 hours daily, with 30 minutes’ break after five and a half hours and a daily rest of 10 consecutive hours.

There are the general Working Time Regulations 1998, which limit the working week to an average of 48 hours—although I am aware that of course individuals can opt out of that requirement if they choose to—and provide an entitlement to adequate rest. There is also health and safety at work legislation, which places a duty on employers to ensure the health and safety of their employees and others who may be put at risk by their work activities. That includes a duty on employers to manage the risks from fatigue, irrespective of any individual’s willingness to work extra hours.
Colleagues have made some comments about the legislation in other countries, so I should perhaps just clarify that. A point was made about not adopting EU regulations, but the EU regulations do not apply to local bus drivers. No EU regulation of local bus driver hours exists. Is fatigue covered? Yes, most certainly it is; it is right at the heart of health and safety legislation, which includes a duty on operators to manage fatigue. The safeguards we have in place should have prevented the tragedy of that terrible crash in Coventry, had they been properly followed. The point, of course, is that they were not.

**Matt Western:** On that point, it is my understanding that this is a derogation and every country can derogate from the EU directive on local bus driving hours. However, in the two examples I gave, Germany and the Netherlands, they abide by the 56 hours and the 90 hours for a fortnightly period. My simple premise is, why can we not have consistency between the hours worked by a local bus driver? As I said, is it not bizarre that a box of cornflakes is more likely to arrive at its destination safely than a seven-year-old child?

**Andrew Jones:** I remind the hon. Gentleman that, as I understand it, there are no EU regulations that apply directly, so the read-across is not absolute, and we have other legislation in place. However, as with all the comments from colleagues here, I will, of course, make sure that I go back and discuss that with my hon. Friend the Member for Wealden, who is the bus Minister and is taking this case forward, to ensure that they are all absolutely understood. The key point, I think, is that a difference has been seen in the style of driving and the recognition of driving, with different stoppage patterns, but the point about fatigue is correct and that is why it is built into health and safety legislation.

I will press on to talk about the incident. We have a legislative framework in place and it should have been followed. It was not followed. While the driver in question was within the working hours limits—a point made by the hon. Member for Warwick and Leamington—there had been multiple warnings that he should not have been behind the wheel that day, including numerous passenger complaints, which were not acted upon.

Although I am sure this is of no comfort at all to Rowan and Dora’s families, the bus driver was found guilty in his absence of causing death by dangerous driving, and the bus company was found guilty under the Health and Safety at Work etc. Act 1974 of putting members of the public and its own staff at risk and was fined £2.3 million. Following the bus operator’s conviction, the traffic commissioner held a public inquiry on 30 January this year to consider the operator’s good repute.

As part of the inquiry, the operator listed the actions taken since the October 2015 accident with a view to preventing such an accident from happening again. Those include medical reviews of drivers over 70, which now take place every six months rather than the statutory requirement of every 12 months. Any driving instructor’s report highlighting a need to reduce a driver’s hours must now be brought to the attention of the company’s operations director and managing director. Instructions and advice about such restrictions must now be issued in writing. The company has limited casual drivers to 40 hours, work per week since the incident and, since 5 January this year, has ceased using casual drivers altogether.

The traffic commissioner published his decision in March this year. On top of the £2.3 million fine imposed by the courts, the traffic commissioner took the regulatory action of varying the company’s licence to reduce the number of vehicles it could operate for a 28-day period. That regulatory action was a strong warning to the company, and through the company to the entire industry, that it had failed to come up to expectations in ensuring the safety of its staff and other road users, and that if such a failure was ever repeated, the complete loss of its right to operate would be the likely consequence.

It is important that we look at every opportunity to raise awareness of the lessons learned from this tragic accident and the importance of continuing to improve safety. The hon. Member for Reading East (Matt Rodda) spoke about how safety should be at the heart of our transport networks. That point was also made by the hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick). We have discussed it on countless occasions, and he knows that we are in exactly the same place in placing great priority on road safety.

**Matt Western:** Does the Minister sense that there is possibly under-resourcing or under-capacity in the enforcement of what should be going on with these bus companies and through their depots? How much random independent checking is going on to ensure that they are conforming to existing legislation?

**Andrew Jones:** That is an important point. The traffic commissioner is the regulator and responsible for the licensing and regulation of public service vehicles, which includes enforcement and prosecution where appropriate. We also have the DVSA—the Driver and Vehicle Standards Agency—which carries out monitoring and compliance checks. Those can include not only routine checks, but reactive or proactive checks where there is evidence that an operator is non-compliant or an issue has been reported.

There are methods in place, with checks and balances, to be reactive in response to information or proactive if necessary. Those checks can include looking at the logs of drivers’ rosters and considering the health and wellbeing of drivers. Those are the two methods through which the regulations can be enforced.

**Jim Fitzpatrick:** I am grateful to the Minister for that further explanation of the checks and balances in the system. Given the numbers of complaints that he catalogued that were recorded against this driver in the days, weeks and months preceding the tragic crash, is he reassured by the traffic commissioner and the other authorities that cases of drivers such as the one responsible, who got away with so much for so long, will not be able to be repeated because of the example of this case, where clearly the system did not work?

**Andrew Jones:** That is at the heart of what is happening. The system has not worked here, and the points about how we take that forward and improve the enforcement and vigour of the regulation are central to where we need to go. That is a point that I will be taking from this debate and taking to my hon. Friend the bus Minister in our meetings next week, when she is back from overseas.
It might be helpful if I updated the House on some of the data involving buses. We all need to see a continuation of the long-term trend of improving road safety in the UK. Colleagues in the House have made a significant contribution to that over a sustained period, and we all owe them a duty of thanks. It has led to the UK—along with, I think, Sweden—having the safest roads in the world. There are still significant areas where we need to make more progress, but we should look at that sustained cross-party initiative with some pride, although we recognise that there is no room for any complacency anywhere at all.

On that point, the hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse asked about the new Minister with responsibility for road safety. My hon. Friend the Minister of State, Department for Transport, is not here and I should be a little cautious about putting things in his diary, but I am absolutely confident that he will wish to engage strongly with the all-party group. I will also pass on to him the comments made about the updated road safety statement.

Fatal road accidents involving buses have been falling over time. The number of buses involved in fatal road accidents, per billion vehicle miles, has fallen by 36% in the last 10 years, so there is a positive downward trend and we want it to continue. It needs to be kept in mind that the GB domestic drivers’ hours rules set maximum limits, to give some flexibility to the bus industry, and do not reflect drivers’ normal working patterns. Figures from the Office for National Statistics show that, on average, in 2017 bus drivers worked 42 hours a week, which is within the 48 hours average limit allowed in the general working time rules. The bus Minister has promised to look into the robustness of these figures, and it is of course some of the outlying figures, rather than the average, that we need to focus on here. The average is perhaps not showing the entire picture, which is why that further work needs to be done.

Matt Rodda: I thank the Minister for his detailed exploration of the figures. Perhaps he would agree to ask his Minister to write to me and to my hon. Friend the Member for Warwick and Leamington, detailing, as he said, some of the outlying figures and giving a much fuller picture of the statistics on this aspect of bus safety, and perhaps also indicating the level of resources for the traffic commissioners’ office at present.

Andrew Jones: I will certainly pass that request on. I know that my hon. Friend is already planning to write to the hon. Member for Warwick and Leamington, but I will pass that request on very happily.

Following its inquiry, the Select Committee on Transport published its report entitled “Bus services in England outside London” on 22 May. One recommendation in the report is that the Government consult on whether legislation governing GB drivers’ hours is still fit for purpose or should be amended. The Government are currently considering the recommendations in the report and will of course publish a response in due course.

The Department for Transport did conduct an extensive review of the effectiveness of the GB domestic drivers’ hours rules in 2009-10. That looked at whether these vehicles should fall under any of the provisions in the EU drivers’ hours rules. At that time, the Government decided not to make any changes, concluding that the existing rules are both important and appropriate in ensuring the safety of drivers and others on the road and that any further restrictions could risk placing further burdens on the sector, but it is clearly appropriate to keep monitoring this. As new data becomes available, it should obviously inform our decision making.

I understand from the Confederation of Passenger Transport UK, the main trade association representing the bus industry, that the accident that we have been discussing and the resulting court case have already had an impact on the sector. The public inquiry illustrated that a complex chain of organisational and management factors or unsafe acts contributed to this terrible incident.

As the hon. Member for Reading East highlighted, buses are a vital industry. It is important that we support the bus industry to thrive, while ensuring that safety is at its heart. I absolutely agree with that. It is why we have the Bus Services Act 2017. We of course need to have a transport sector that has safety at its heart.

The hon. Gentleman also talked about investment in the sector. We have obviously seen pressures on local government finance in particular, but the national support for buses, through the bus service operators grant, has been protected at a quarter of a billion pounds, and that has been in place for many years.

The Bus Services Act is all about giving greater powers to local authorities. At the heart of those is partnership, but there could be franchising as well. We want to see a thriving bus industry, with safety at its heart and passengers at its heart, providing for the sustainable, secure movement of people around our country. That new set of powers, which are still being worked through by local authorities up and down the country, is at the heart of how we are seeking to take that forward.

In addition to the Bus Services Act, the industry is currently considering a bus safety strategy. As a Department, we welcome the bus safety strategy. Industry groups such as the Urban Transport Group have been considering what a strategy might include and delivering research into other sectors, such as rail and aviation, that have effective near-miss reporting systems in order to understand how near misses are reported and acted on. If there are lessons to be learned from other sectors, we should seek to learn them. The aviation sector has a very good track record, and interestingly that has been used as a template for how we can do reporting and for changing the culture in areas of public life such as our health service.

The public inquiry illustrated that in this case there were multiple reports of unsafe acts or near misses, and the failure to act contributed to this terrible incident. Department for Transport officials are working with the Urban Transport Group as it develops the strategy, and I know that the lessons learned from this incident will be fed into the development of the strategy. It is important to know that. I hope that it will be of some comfort to the families of Rowan and Dora that the lessons from this incident are being fed into the development of safety strategies.

Both the industry and the Government are determined to minimise the chances of this crash ever being repeated. There is strong consensus across the industry that there
Andrew Jones

is no substitute for a closely managed culture in which safety is paramount. As a Government, we take this issue very seriously and will continue to press the bus industry at every opportunity to continue to improve its policies and procedures and ensure that it complies with all its legal duties, so that no driver gets behind the wheel of a bus who is not safe to drive that bus.

As I have said, I will be meeting the bus Minister next week so that she knows the content of our debate. I will ensure that all the points made by colleagues here are taken forward and she is fully sighted on them, and that we maintain the progress that is being made on road safety in general and bus safety in particular.

I would like to finish by paying tribute once more to Rowan’s family for their bravery and dignity in handling what must be so difficult an issue and seeking to draw something so positive from it.

3.48 pm

Matt Western: I thank the Minister and, indeed, everyone who has participated in the debate. I also thank the Minister for standing in for his ministerial colleague, because clearly this is not his direct brief.

Where I differ from the Minister is on his point that the bus industry’s focus is on sustainability and safety. I am not convinced by that; I think that the focus of any private sector company is really profitability and sustainability. Safety seems to be a little further down the list of priorities.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick) so eloquently put it, the fundamental issue here is driver fatigue, and the need for us to legislate to ensure that passengers, and the driver, have every chance of arriving at a destination safely, and to ensure that the driver is not put in the difficult position of having to work excessive hours simply to survive and bring enough money home, which is what has happened as a result of the depression of drivers’ wages over recent decades.

The point about health checks is important, and I welcome the moves being made in that regard. Health checks have to be independent and regular. I do not believe that 70 is the right threshold—I think it should be an earlier age—but that is for independent authorities to review and consider.

It is important to look at European legislation. The Government claim that our legislation is generally stronger or better than that of Europe, but that is clearly not the case in this instance. The legislation in Germany and the Netherlands is much stronger, and would, I believe, result in much safer road conditions for passengers and other road users here.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Reading East (Matt Rodda) for his remarks. He is quite right about safety devices: they should be fitted to all vehicles. I do not believe they were operating at the time of this incident. Certainly, on many of that particular bus company’s vehicles, many of the devices were found not to be operable. These are the sorts of things that require greater enforcement, and the relevant agencies should check for compliance. I ask the Minister to refer this to his colleague, and to commit to publishing the data on what checks are done and how frequently. I am not convinced that we have that reassurance from the various authorities that are supposed to do that on behalf of the public.

To return to the point I made at the outset, the simple truth is that there is more chance of a box of cornflakes arriving safely at its destination than of a child or any other passenger on a local bus route doing so. That cannot be right. That is why so many of us here are calling for these changes, and have done so in other forums. I am disappointed that more people were not here today, but it is understandable, given how important the by-election in Peterborough is.

I am calling for the introduction of a maximum of 56 driving hours per week, and of 90 hours per fortnight, with a 45 minute break over a work period of four and a half hours. We have to avoid a race to the bottom. Many of us in this House fear that post Brexit, whatever happens, there will be a race to the bottom, and legislation will become ever weaker and more diluted. That point was well made by the hon. Member for Linlithgow and East Falkirk (Martyn Day). I welcome the inclusion of this issue in the Transport Committee’s report. It is important that it be given more prominence and urgency, and I hope that we can bring the changes to realisation soon.

Finally, I thank Rowan’s family for coming along today, for their courage, and for their encouragement. I assure them that I will continue to fight on their behalf to bring about this change.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered local bus drivers’ working hours.

3.53 pm

Sitting adjourned.
Westminster Hall

Monday 10 June 2019

[MR ADRIAN BAILEY in the Chair]

Cystic Fibrosis Drugs: Orkambi

[Relevant documents: Oral evidence taken before the Health and Social Care Committee on 7 March, on the availability of Orkambi by the NHS, HC 1808; the correspondence to the Secretary of State reported to the House on 8 March; and the correspondence from NHS England, Vertex Pharmaceuticals and the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence reported to the House on 4 June.]

4.30 pm

Paul Scully (Sutton and Cheam) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered e-petition 231602 relating to access to Orkambi and other drugs for people with cystic fibrosis.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bailey. I will read the petition, if I may:

“Children & young adults with CF endure lifelong suffering & early death. They need Orkambi and other precision medicines as they are developed. Sufferers in the EU, US & Australia can access the drugs, but not the UK. Hundreds have died in the 3 years since these drugs were licensed. All MPs who debated the petition in March were passionately in favour of supplying the drugs. Despite an ever-increasing abundance of evidence as to the drugs’ effectiveness, CF sufferers still do not have access. Case studies report miraculous improvements in health. Consultants nationwide have asked the NHS to make the drugs available. Doctors have expressed distress at seeing children die whilst the drug they need is on the shelf. After 3 years, conclude negotiations and fund these drugs.”

I pay tribute to Catherine Meredith, who started the petition, and the 108,144 people who had signed it as of today, and the 108,144 people who had signed it as of this morning. Many hon. Members present are here because of their constituents and their long-lasting championing of cystic fibrosis treatment and the need to get these drugs to market as soon as possible.

Cystic fibrosis is a severe, devastating and progressive disease. It is a genetic disease, so we know the exact number of people living with it—70,000 around the world. It is considered by many to be a Celtic disease; the UK has 12% of all sufferers, which makes it an island. It is considered by many to be a Celtic disease; the UK has 12% of all sufferers, which makes it an island. It is considered by many to be a Celtic disease; the UK has 12% of all sufferers, which makes it an island. It is considered by many to be a Celtic disease; the UK has 12% of all sufferers, which makes it an island.

One of them, who is 43, described the disease—this is harsh, especially for any sufferers watching—as his lungs filling up and effectively drowning. That is pertinent to me, because my father died of mesothelioma 30 years ago, after a year of suffering. This man is 43; I cannot imagine that suffering. Early treatment for children, however, stops that build-up in the first place and allows them to keep their lung capacity higher for longer, so they can have a proper standard of living.

Catherine McKinnell (Newcastle upon Tyne North) (Lab): I suspect that my fellow Petitions Committee member shares my concern that families are being put in the terrible position of having not only to deal with a devastating illness and diagnosis, but fight for a treatment that they know is available and that other people across Europe and across the world are receiving. Whether it is cystic fibrosis, Batten disease or phenylketonuria, or PKU, it is wrong that families are wasting their precious energy, which they would like to channel into looking after their children, into fighting for a treatment that could solve many of those medical issues.

Paul Scully: I totally agree with the hon. Lady. It is frustrating to look at access around the world; there is even an interim solution in Scotland. It would be interesting to hear from the Minister about how that may pan out. Scotland has given interim access, including for compassionate use, and further access to some sufferers who can use Orkambi with a view to reporting back in August.

It is disappointing to find that people living with CF, in their ingenuity, have had to resort to looking at a buyers’ club. The Vertex drug is patent pending in Argentina, so another company is making a copy that can be sourced for £18,000 a patient—still a lot of money—rather than £104,000. That £18,000 comes out of their pockets, however, which defeats the idea of the NHS being free at the point of need.

Mark Tami (Alyn and Deeside) (Lab): It is bad enough if a child is suffering with an illness for which there are no medicines to help, but it is incredibly cruel for the patient and the family when they know there is a drug that can help their child.

Paul Scully: There are clearly two sides to the negotiations. The NHS has to understand that CF sufferers are not just names on a spreadsheet; they are real people. We are all here as politicians to represent our constituents, but we are humans first and politicians second. We have to remember the humanity. On the other side of the negotiations, Vertex needs to make sure that these patients—the people living with CF—are not just names on a shareholder report.

John Spellar (Warley) (Lab): I thank the hon. Gentleman for his comprehensive introduction. The fundamental core of the problem is the greed of Vertex and its unreasonablebness in the discussions. Should the Government not play a much stronger role in dealing with the issue of generics? That is the demand of those who are suffering, such as my constituent Nicola Johnson and
her son George, whose capacity is steadily reducing. The Government need to get a move on with that alternative route.

Paul Scully: The right hon. Gentleman is right to say that Vertex has to be reasonable, because the UK is effectively the biggest market for a pharma company that comes in to tackle CF, for the reasons that I have mentioned. It has to understand that the issue is not all about its share price in the long term. As a free-market liberal economist, I recognise that private companies must be allowed to deliver fair profits for their shareholders, which will further research and future investment, but they are sailing close to the wind if they are profiteering from human suffering.

Crispin Blunt (Reigate) (Con): I am grateful to my hon. Friend for leading the debate. I spoke in the previous debate on the subject in the main Chamber. It is right to focus on Orkambi and Vertex, but the issue is actually the process of the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence. If we cannot assess issues such as antimicrobial resistance and new antibiotics in the NICE system, or get a positive answer about them, we need to look at its assessment. I hope the Minister is open to that.

Paul Scully: My hon. Friend makes an interesting point. Clearly, a portfolio of drugs is coming through the system. The original drugs treated only 5% of cystic fibrosis sufferers, but now the figure is 50%. The triple therapy that is being researched can benefit up to 90%, and clinical trials show an increase of 10% in some people’s lung capacity in a single week of using the drug. It is disappointing that Vertex has not included the triple therapy in its negotiations about the portfolio. None the less, my hon. Friend is right that the NICE system needs to be reviewed to take an interesting and innovative approach to drug research in future.

Sir Mike Penning (Hemel Hempstead) (Con): There are those who are listening to the debate but are not experts like the families who live with this every day, but lung transplants are a common procedure. The lungs fill up and do not function, and lung transplants are often the only option. How does NICE take that into consideration? It cannot do so when it is looking at the viability and cost-effectiveness of Orkambi.

Paul Scully: My right hon. Friend makes a really interesting observation. This morning I saw a number of people, some of whom have had a lung transplant. Orkambi was able to get them to the point where they could have a lung transplant in the first place. I spoke to most of the people via video link, because they could not be in the same room as me due to the risk of cross-infection and aspergillosis hitting their lungs. Aspergillus gets in our lungs, and most of us just bat it off and do not have an issue with it. However, it can adversely affect these people’s lung functions, or even be fatal. That is how debilitating the disease is. What struck me about all this are the mental health issues behind it, which I will come back to later.

Janet Daby (Lewisham East) (Lab): I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving us such a comprehensive overview of cystic fibrosis. A constituent of mine, Joanne, has contacted me regarding her daughter Lauren, who suffers from cystic fibrosis. Access to treatments such as Orkambi, which has already been mentioned, would be absolutely crucial to managing hers and so many other people’s conditions in our country. Hon. Members might know that 16 May marks a year since the Prime Minister called for a speedy resolution to this issue. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that we need to hear the actions that the Government can take, and are taking, to open up access to these lifesaving treatments for people such as Lauren in my constituency?

Paul Scully: One of the reasons why NICE was set up in the first place was to take politics out of drug development. We need to ensure that we have the balance right between the Government intervening and the clinicians—the people who can make their assessments without political interference—making their decision. None the less, we clearly must have a view.

One of the things that some people have suggested—I think it was intimated in an earlier intervention—is Crown use of patents, to allow the use of generic drugs and effectively remove patents from pharmaceutical companies. Obviously, that is in extremis. There is an inherent problem with the potential lack of investment in future research, should we start taking away patents from private companies.

Emma Hardy (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman is making a very powerful speech, and I stand here today representing my constituents. Does he agree that when factoring in costs, NICE should also factor in the ongoing costs that not treating cystic fibrosis will bring? It needs to factor in the cost of the additional mental health treatment and other health treatments that will be needed, and possibly even the cost of lung transplants. This is not a simple comparison with the cost of treatment; other things need to be taken into account.

Paul Scully: The hon. Lady has hit on a really crucial point. The underlying thing that I took away from my meeting with the people living with CF this morning was mental health, which ran through all their situations.

I heard from Oli Rayner, who talked about the fact that he is 43 and has dedicated his whole life to staying alive; he had effectively been told that he would not make 10 years. He was then told that he would not make 20, then 30. This is a guy who has now got cystic fibrosis-related diabetes and a number of other conditions. He has had a lung transplant, and he had Orkambi to get him to that stage. The fact is that his lungs are now doing what he wants them to do, without his having to think about it. We can imagine the mental issues that he had before.

Jessica Jones told me that people with CF are very good at living. Yvonne Hughes said she felt broken. One lady, Carly Beale, told me that she had been on the original Orkambi trial. The NHS had not prepared her for when Orkambi stopped at the end of the trial. She had suddenly improved and started to get her life back—perhaps a life that she had not had in the first place—and she was not ready to have it taken away from her. She
said that it is almost worse that this drug exists but she cannot get access to it. She said, “I’d rather it didn’t exist than have it dangled in front of me in expectation.”

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): I am really pleased that there is now cross-party working on this issue. Life expectancy is a very sensitive issue for cystic fibrosis patients and their parents. I am aware that Conservative MPs have been sending round a letter that points out—as if the letter’s recipients ought to be grateful—that life expectancy for CF patients has now increased to 40, although I think it is more like 31. It seems a little insensitive, and I hope that MPs present would report that back.

Paul Scully: It is an unfortunate manner of phrasing. There is no doubt about the fact that median life expectancy has increased. For someone born now, the projection is that they are likely to have a median life expectancy of 47. It is clearly an improvement, and hopefully these drugs will carry on extending that. It is a matter of wording, and I do not think any offence was intended.

Andrew Griffiths (Burton) (Con): I think my hon. Friend will win this year’s prize for taking the most interventions in a debate, such is the level of interest in this debate. I know the Minister will have taken note of the cross-party interest, and I hope that Vertex is also taking note of just how much interest there is among Members of Parliament.

I am here today because Elaine and Chris Colborne came to see about their three-year-old grandchildren, James and Alex. Although it is terrible for any parent—I am one myself—to see their child suffering, it is even worse for a grandparent in some respects. They see the little child suffering, and they also see the anguish of their child—the parent who on a day-by-day basis has to live with the consequences and the pain that comes from CF. This is a hugely important debate and we agree that it is not just about Orkambi; it is actually about the pipeline of other drugs that are coming through. Even if we were to solve the problem with Orkambi, we might be in a situation in which new drugs come forward in the future. We need to tackle the issue, not just this particular drug.

Paul Scully: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to say that we are looking at that pipeline, which is so important. That is why this process is different from the kind that NICE is used to. I hope that NICE can be accommodating enough to suit the pipeline, and that Vertex can come back with its triple therapy, which will help so many people.

Mr Ranil Jayawardena (North East Hampshire) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on opening this important debate. Although we can get hung up on process, NICE, NHS England and, dare I say it, Her Majesty’s Government, is it not true that real people’s lives are at the heart of this? As I understand it, Vertex has been offered the most generous settlement in the entire history of the NHS. Is it not time that the company now took the brave decision to accept a very generous deal?

Paul Scully: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Vertex has a pipeline that should help its shares—their value has doubled over the past few years, and I am sure they will do very well in future—but we must have a balance with shareholder value, so that the company can continue to invest and continue its research. As he says, this is about human beings, their quality of life and their lives.

Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP): The hon. Gentleman has struck a chord with the points that he has raised, which have been heard by Members of different parties. We must also make this cross-channel, and Northern Ireland cannot be left out of this arrangement. I know the chief medical officer has been in discussions with NICE and the Department to ensure that no postcode in the whole of the United Kingdom is left out of a settlement in this matter.

Paul Scully: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. Northern Ireland must surely be in there too.

Gerald Jones (Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney) (Lab): This debate is primarily about the availability of Orkambi in England. The 540 of my constituents who signed the petition and Rebeccia and Matthew Bow, who contacted me on behalf of their daughter, Sofia, are really keen to see progress in Wales. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that it is important for health across the UK that we work together to ensure that there is a co-ordinated approach with Vertex to make Orkambi available right across the United Kingdom?

Paul Scully: The hon. Gentleman is right. Cystic fibrosis is a rare disease that particularly affects this part of the world, so we must find a way of working together across the whole of the UK.

James Frith (Bury North) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman is making a compelling case. I know that this issue matters to him and to many others in the Chamber. One of the many issues that victims of this wicked disease face is that they cannot congregate and make the case for themselves—such is the risk of infection. It is therefore incumbent on us to make a cross-party effort to amplify their cause. They face the inflexibility of NICE and the rigidity of Vertex’s pricing, but they now have the hope that the Minister will hear anew the campaign from colleagues from across the House.

Does the hon. Gentleman agree that, in this instance, per-patient pricing is not an accurate conclusion for Vertex to reach? It should take the deal on the table and begin to save lives; its indecision to date is costing lives.

Paul Scully: The hon. Gentleman has absolutely nailed it. That is very much the point. This is about human beings, and we are dangling something in front of them that they just cannot access. The fact that people go off to Argentina and spend their own money to get the drug is ridiculous. That is a really important point.

Anneliese Dodds (Oxford East) (Lab/Co-op) rose—

Paul Scully: I will make two more points about mental health, and then I will let someone else intervene.

As I said earlier, Oli Rayner said that he effectively spent 10 years preparing to die. He even cold-called a vicar to plan his own funeral. He is now 43 and has a relatively clean bill of health after having a lung transplant. It is outrageous that he had to do that.
I want to raise with the Minister the case of Carlie Pleasant, who ironically works for the NHS. She has CF and has had to go to the hospital a number of times. Her HR manager has told her that she has had too many days off sick, and that she has reached the trigger point. Basically, she has been told that she may be able to make up for it if she is not off for the next couple of months. She has a husband and a young child, she is running a home and she is trying to keep her job and pay her mortgage. How much pressure does that put on her mental health?

There must be thousands of sufferers in a similar situation across the country. We are talking about a life-saving, quality-of-life drug. When we, and especially the Government, try to ensure parity of esteem between mental and physical health, we must all ensure that that balance is reflected not just by treatments but by everybody in the health system and every employer.

Anneliese Dodds: I am very grateful indeed to the hon. Gentleman for giving way. He is making a very persuasive case, and it is obviously supported by many of us. Returning briefly to his point about buyers’ clubs, he will be aware that many sufferers and their families have already made significant financial contributions to CF research. The Oxford group, made up mainly of parents and grandparents of people with CF; has raised more than £174,000 for research just since 2003. They are obviously very upset at the current impasse, as they have made that contribution and they now feel that they have to do it again through buyers’ groups. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that that is totally unacceptable?

Paul Scully: The hon. Lady is right. The fact that people have to resort to such things is ridiculous given that we have a comprehensive health system. It is about time Vertex recognised that there is plenty of time for it to make a reasonable profit on its drugs portfolio. It is not helping the situation. There are a number of people from the Cystic Fibrosis Trust in the Public Gallery, but unfortunately, as the hon. Member for Bury North (James Frith) said, many sufferers cannot be here because of the danger of cross-infection. They are hopefully watching the debate on television or on their computers.

Teresa Pearce (Erith and Thamesmead) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman is being extremely generous in giving way. On the issue of shareholdings and profit, when I was doing research for this debate, I came across something in the Wall Street news that told me that Vertex gives a higher than average return on investment. Most companies that operate in this area give a return on investment to shareholders of 20%; last year, Vertex gave 45%.

Paul Scully: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for pointing that out.

Luke Hall (Thornbury and Yate) (Con): My hon. Friend for his commitment to it. He opened the previous debate, when the Chamber was completely full, and he has opened this debate fantastically well. Does he agree that the message that should go out from this debate is that a permanent deal must be agreed with Vertex as soon as possible? We cannot rely on buyers’ clubs or any other mechanism.

Paul Scully: My hon. Friend is absolutely right.

Sir George Howarth (Knowsley) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman is making a very powerful case that we all accept. A moment or two ago, he mentioned somebody he met earlier today who suffers not only from diabetes but from cystic fibrosis. Could we imagine a situation in which someone who has type 1 diabetes and needs insulin to survive has it taken away? Although the two conditions are completely different, is there not some equivalence between the two?

Paul Scully: The right hon. Gentleman is absolutely right; that is a really good point. Actually, the diabetes came from the cystic fibrosis, but he is right to talk about the medication in that way.

Alan Mak (Havant) (Con): My hon. Friend is making a persuasive speech. This issue is important in my Havant constituency, as it is in the constituency of my right hon. Friend the Member for Tunbridge Wells (Greg Clark), who is sitting next to me. Does my hon. Friend the Member for Sutton and Cheam (Paul Scully) agree that while we praise the work of the Cystic Fibrosis Trust, we should also commend it for the research into the condition that it does itself? I urge hon. Members from across the House to support any bids for funding that it makes to the NHS or other funding bodies so it can continue its important work in this field.

Paul Scully: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. I have been to the Cystic Fibrosis Trust twice, and I was absolutely blown away. It is the kind of organisation that I got into politics to help. I met Lynsey Beswick, who works there—she may be in the Public Gallery. She is a CF sufferer, and she has just climbed Snowden. I would struggle with that, and she has reduced lung capacity. [Applause.] That is the first time I have got a round of applause in Westminster Hall; I am not sure it is to be encouraged. Lynsey, that is for you.

John Stevenson (Carlisle) (Con): My hon. Friend is giving personal experiences of how this illness has affected individuals. I met Ayda’s family last week to discuss how it affected them. I have been thinking about the benefits that the introduction of the drug could bring about. One is a saving to the NHS through not needing to use other drugs. The family would need fewer visits to the hospital, which would have an effect on patient care and would free up time for the hospital to look after other patients. Does he agree that it would also bring about a significant improvement to family life, not just for the individual, but for the extended family too?
Paul Scully: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. The young son of the lady who had her Orkambi withdrawn at the end of the trial asked her, “Mum, what was the worst day of your life?” She said, “It was when that drug was taken from me.” Her son—from memory, I think he was seven—said, “You know what? That was the worst day in my life as well.” This is about the extended family and the people around the patient. A number of hon. Members have talked about the cost per patient, but it is not just about the patient; it is also about their friends, family and loved ones.

Gillian Keegan (Chichester) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend for securing this debate. I met my constituent Jack when I went to visit our local hospital. It is not surprising that I met him, because he spends six months in the hospital every year. He is now running out of treatment; he has tried everything. He is on 30 tablets a day, and he is on nebulisers. He is trying treatment after treatment, and the treatments are running out. Patients like Jack need this drug urgently, because there is almost nothing left.

Paul Scully: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. People are desperate; this has been dangled in front of them and it is about time that we acted.

I welcome my hon. Friend the Minister to her place—it is fantastic to see her serve as well as she does. I know that Vertex and NICE will be listening to the debate, and I hope that they act. It is so important that that we get this right and get it done now, for the sake of the thousands of people across the country who look to politicians to do things. I talked about the independence of the system, but we need none the less to do everything we can to bring the parties together to ensure that they deal with the matter. As I keep saying, this is about human beings, their life expectancy and their quality of life. I look forward to the Minister’s response.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Adrian Bailey (in the Chair): Order. Seventeen would-be speakers are listed for the debate. Back-Bench contributions will conclude at 6.58 pm to allow for the Front-Bench speeches and the proposer’s summing up. I will therefore put a six-minute time limit on individual contributions. I call Kerry McCarthy.

5 pm

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Bailey; it is a pleasure to see you in the Chair. I thank the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam (Paul Scully) for introducing the debate on behalf of the Petitions Committee.

As we have heard, Orkambi is a life-changing treatment that stands to benefit 4,000 cystic fibrosis patients in the UK—40% of the total number of people with the condition—and which was licensed almost four years ago. In some ways, the debate has almost moved beyond Orkambi, because other drugs now being developed would help an even greater proportion of patients. Vertex’s ongoing refusal to offer a price for Orkambi that the NHS can afford means that those patients are still unable to benefit from the treatment.

I will point out—this is important to what I will say next—that in 2017 alone, Vertex earned £2.5 billion from the sale of Orkambi, while its chief executive was paid more than £17 million. Pharmaceutical companies such as Vertex play an important role in the development of innovative medicines and money goes into that, so I entirely accept that they should make a profit as a result, but to pursue excessive reward at the cost of patients’ lives is, I believe, morally bankrupt.

I will speak about alternative approaches. A few weeks ago, I had the opportunity to meet an Argentine drug company that has come up with a generic alternative to Orkambi. I also met two parents, one of whom was fortunate enough to be in a position to be able to spend a six-figure sum on Orkambi for his young son, who, he said, was, he said, doing well on it. He was clearly in a very privileged position to be able to do that. The other father was not in that position and was looking at the buyers’ club approach that has been mentioned and featured on “Newsnight” on Tuesday. He said that if he had to sell his house to afford to buy the drugs at the reduced price—around the £18,000-mark—he would do so, because his son is far more important to him than the place he lives.

I was introduced to the Argentine drugs company by a Bristol-based international organisation called Just Treatment. With a range of experts in the field, Just Treatment has made contact with the generic manufacturer of the drugs, which can supply a safe and effective version of Orkambi at a cost for individual CF patients of about £23,000 per patient per year—just 30% of what Vertex charges. If there were a buyers’ club, the price could come down.

The term “buyers’ club” comes from the Hollywood film, “Dallas Buyers Club”, which gave a fictionalised account of the buyers’ clubs that popped up in the ’80s and ’90s because of the lack of access to HIV treatment. The clubs enable patients to understand their right to procure more affordable generic versions of drugs that they would otherwise struggle to access.

In Argentina, a small number of people have CF, and only a couple of hundred would benefit from Orkambi, of whom 120 take the generic alternative and seem to be doing well. The longest that anyone has taken it is 18 months, so although it is early days, treatments seem to be going well. Initial discussions with the generic manufacturer suggest that once 500 patients sign up to receive the drug, the cost would drop to just 20% of that demanded by Vertex.

Clearly, whether it costs £18,000 or £23,000, the drug is still not affordable for most people, which is why I would argue that although that is a step forward for some, the Government need to step in and help patients. The most effective way they can do that is by pursuing a Crown use licence for Orkambi. A few months ago in the House, the hon. Member for North Herefordshire (Bill Wiggin) mentioned that possibility in the context of access to medicines for CF patients. In the legal provisions set out in section 55 of the Patents Act 1977, the Government have the power to suspend Vertex’s patent on Orkambi and overturn its monopoly. One of the Government’s primary objections to that route has been the concern that it could take years to develop a generic product, but as I have said, a generic product is now on the market, is being tested and is available for patients in the UK, although only three boxes can be provided at a time and it is still unaffordable at the price that I mentioned.
The Government should also explore the funding of a large-scale clinical trial, which would enable the NHS to use research exemptions in intellectual property rights law and allow it to use the generic version of Orkambi. That approach has been used before, with the HIV prevention medication PrEP, or pre-exposure prophylaxis, and ensured that tens of thousands of patients were able to access that drug while its expensive branded counterpart was still under patent—I would be particularly interested in Minister’s response to that. A trial could be set up in anticipation of a Crown use licence, providing data necessary to support regulatory approval of the generic version of Orkambi.

If the Government are unwilling to pursue either of those routes—I cannot see why they should be reluctant to do so—there is another alternative that goes down the buyers’ club route: providing personalised health budget payments to help patients meet the cost of the generic drug. People are absolutely fed up of the deadlock between Vertex and the NHS, so I urge the Government to look at those more imaginative solutions.

Secondly, the same evaluation process is also used whether the drug is taken for a brief period or a long one—in other words, whether it is a short use cancer-related drug or, as in the case of Orkambi, it must keep being taken over many long periods. That factor needs to be built into any evaluation of the drug as well.

The third criticism that I would make of the NICE process is that it is too focused on short-term benefits, and not on long-term benefits, which we know that Orkambi can produce. As has been mentioned, the data released by Vertex show that after 96 weeks of treatment, the rate of lung function decline reduced by 42%. That is a major long-term thing to hang on to. Furthermore, the net value of Orkambi is hard to calculate and therefore to capture accurately. A number of direct costs need to be taken into account, such as the cost of hospitalisation, and there is evidence that Orkambi starts to reduce the number of other medicines that need to be taken.

We have heard that Orkambi is available in many other countries in Europe, although I hear that the Spanish Government are having difficulties with Vertex, in the same way as we are, over the availability of the drug. The agreement that was reached with Vertex to make Orkambi available was a disappointing affair. We need to put pressure on ensuring that that happens and that generic drugs are brought forward to be used instead. The example often cited is Ireland—bother families in my constituency mentioned the situation there—and it is interesting to note that success story of the use of Orkambi. It has been very successful there, and we should all take that to heart in making progress to ensure that young people suffering from cystic fibrosis have access to this drug.

Two families in my constituency have children with cystic fibrosis. I have spent time with both families, and have seen that largely the children are happy, normal children who enjoy all the things that other children enjoy. Hanging over them, however, is the threat of a double-lung transplant just to stay alive.

Orkambi changes lives, and we need to look at ways that we can make it available. A number of structural difficulties were identified during the conversations that I have had on the matter. The first is one of commercial incentive and risk. To compound that point, one can look at the relative strength in numbers of those who suffer from diabetes or from cystic fibrosis: diabetes accounts for 4 million people, while cystic fibrosis accounts for only 70,000. A major hurdle is therefore already built in for those with cystic fibrosis to overcome. We should not forget that.

The issue of the time taken, which has already been raised, goes back to criticisms of the NICE process. The criticisms that I would make fall into three types: first, NICE adopts the same evaluation process for a drug that might treat tens of millions of people as it does for a drug that treats a few hundred thousand or, indeed, a few thousand. We need to bring home to NICE that that is not a right way to proceed.

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The NHS has a responsibility to consider the wider cost of drugs, including the opportunity costs—what we cannot treat if our NHS budget is consumed completely by the ever-rising cost of drugs. I hope that those points bring home that responsibility is a tough message for all of us, which is why we need bodies such as NICE to make the decisions to ensure fairness for all patients who rely on NHS resources. To put that in context, the drugs budget in 2017-18 was £18.2 billion. A little more than half of that was for hospital drugs and, over the past seven years, the costs of those drugs have increased by 119%. We therefore have to bear in mind the implications of taking a free-for-all approach to drugs costs, which the Minister will not want to do.

The Government are trying to get the parties around the table. Unfortunately, the gap is huge between what Vertex continues to demand for the drugs and what the NHS is offering based on recommendations from NICE. The gap is not small; it is considerable. Other companies have come to the table to negotiate their prices, so I call on Vertex to look again at what is happening. It is absolutely disgraceful that families have to resort to such things as buyers’ clubs; the inequalities that that creates are horrific. We need Vertex to focus on what is happening.

I am also concerned about some of the points made during our Health and Social Care Committee inquiry into Vertex. For example, we asked the company directly whether drug supplies had been destroyed because they were going off date, and we were told that that was not the case and was very unlikely to happen—but it has been happening. That is wholly unacceptable.

To come back to the alternatives, the hon. Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy) touched on the issue of Crown use licences, for example. One of the areas that our Committee considered was possible referral to the Competition and Markets Authority. In fact, we have now heard that that would take many years, so unfortunately the area does not look like one we can pursue further. However, given so little progress since our inquiry, the Committee wrote to all the parties involved in the negotiations—NHS England, Vertex and NICE—to ask where we are now.

The most promising idea that we should take forward to apply pressure is that of interim agreements, such as those managed in Scotland and other places, as we have heard from other speakers today, and I urge Vertex to do that. We all recognise the need for a fair price to enable further research to take place. We all recognise that many other drugs are in the pipeline, particularly a very promising triple therapy, which NHS England has now agreed to take off the table so that it does not distort future pricing. That is a sensible thing to do at this stage, so that within the current offer we look just at the three existing treatments. At a later stage, we can come back to look at the triple therapy evidence. I urge all parties to come to an interim agreement at least, and to continue to put patients front and centre in everything they do.

Finally, I would like to touch on the political aspect, because both President Trump and US Secretary of State Azar have repeatedly referred to the points of pressure that countries would have to pay for their drugs. They have referred to the NHS “freeloading”, for example. That is very worrying. We all need to be aware of the dangers of a future trade deal and the implications that it could have on negotiations for a range of other products. I hope that points bring home once again to the debate. All parties need to focus on the people at the heart of the issue: the patients who are living with cystic fibrosis.

Mr Adrian Bailey (in the Chair): I gave the Chair of the Select Committee a little latitude, but that may not be available to other speakers. I call Sir Mike Penning.

Sir Mike Penning (Hemel Hempstead) (Con): We all hoped that we would not be in this debate again, a year on from the last one. It is a tribute to the House that we have come together, from across the House, for a debate, which probably should take place in the main Chamber, about what is in my opinion an immoral situation, frankly: families are still waiting for a drug that we know can extend lives and prevent a serious need for invasive and very painful surgery. The situation causes a lot of worry among extended families.

Across the Irish sea in the Republic of Ireland—a country that is poorer than us in GDP terms—and in other countries that are also poorer than us, the deal has been done. It is not just a shame but a blight on our proud NHS that we have not come to an agreement one way or the other with Vertex and that we have not made a decision about whether we will go down the Crown use licensing route if Vertex cannot do a deal with us. We could have started that way back—they said it would delay everything, but we are here now, and there are patents being developed around the world. The situation is not of benefit to Vertex—we have heard about its shares—because it has not been able to sell its product in a country with a prominent number of CF sufferers.

Why is this happening? Is it just about cost? Is it just because civil servants and Vertex do not care about the lives of those wonderful people and their children? Is it about greed, or is it about how we procure drugs, as we have heard? When NICE was brought in, it took the politician, quite rightly, out of the decision making. But we cannot be outside it, because we are here as representatives of people who are suffering in constituencies around the country. We are here to be their voice. They have done fantastically well—the campaign group is brilliant: one of the top campaigns out there—but we do not seem to get anywhere. We have to look at how NICE looks at whether something is value for money. How can we value someone’s life? How do we value someone having a lung transplant later in life? What if they are not well enough to have that lung transplant, and they die early? What about the cost on not only physical health but mental health?

Let me stretch the House’s imagination a little. I used to be the roads Minister. Understandably, everybody wants roads—they want bypasses here and there. I had a simple way of looking at them: we would look at the benefit-cost ratio and say, “If we put money into that pot, what is the benefit to the community?” It would be £1 billion for a bypass, but the community benefit would be £3 billion, for example. Clearly, the way that NICE is looking at this drug is that there is not a good cost-benefit ratio, even though we know how much benefit there would be. NICE needs to look down the other end of the telescope.
[Sir Mike Penning]

Things have changed since NICE was set up—medicine has changed and drugs have changed, as the Chair of the Health and Social Care Committee, the hon. Member for Totnes (Dr Wollaston), mentioned. There are generic drugs coming down the line that are fundamentally targeted at certain illnesses, particularly ones that people inherit and are born with. Those drugs can turn off that switch and make the situation better, but NICE was never set up to deal with them. I was a shadow Health Minister for four and a half years; we looked at how NICE could develop and where to go with it. NICE is quite fixed, but because we politicians tell it to be. The House set up NICE—those with a long enough memory will remember when we did—with the Department of Health.

The key is for NICE to look at this issue differently. We can set up trials and we can find out why Scotland has an interim agreement, but the trials are there now. How immoral is it that someone was put on Vertex and their life expectancy got better, but it was removed? We are not talking about millions of people—surely, Vertex could have addressed that. We cannot sit here or in the main Chamber next year debating exactly the same thing that we debated last year. I do not care what colour the Government are: if there is a change of Government tomorrow morning, the issue will be exactly the same. Minister, for the sake of humanity, and families and loved ones, we have to do something about this, and we need to do it now.

5.26 pm

Thelma Walker (Colne Valley) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bailey.

It is just two years ago last week that I was elected Member of Parliament for Colne Valley. Over the past two years, it has been a real privilege to serve and speak up for my constituents. One day, however, will stand out more than most for me, among many amazing and challenging days. It was Friday 31 May, when two children visited me in my constituency office. One was nine-year-old Tristan with his grandpa John, and the other was one-year-old toddler Charlie with his Mum and Dad. I had had a busy advice surgery that afternoon, but went straight to meet Charlie in one room, while Tristan waited patiently in another. They were in different rooms to avoid cross infection as they both suffer from cystic fibrosis.

They had come to see me to each hand me a letter in which they described their daily challenges living with cystic fibrosis. The letter also described how access to targeted at certain illnesses, particularly ones that people inherit and are born with. This situation, in which children's lives are held to ransom, must not continue. Vertex and NHS England must agree a price. We know that Vertex declined a £500 million offer from NHS England, and we know that the NHS has made a new offer, which currently remains confidential. Vertex did not consider £500 million an adequate sum, but it did, allegedly, consider it okay to destroy 8,000 packs, or a 600-year supply of Orkambi, as the deadlock continued. The lives of children such as Tristan and Charlie seem to be deemed acceptable collateral damage in this boardroom-style version of healthcare provision.

I urge Vertex to consider the NHS’s current offer with the lives of children such as Charlie and Tristan at the forefront of its mind. This seems to me to be a straightforward ethical decision for Vertex, which should be willing to compromise on its profit margin in circumstances where the lives of children are at stake. Let us be clear: Vertex is not struggling to make ends meet. It is a $43 billion company. That is about the same as the GDP of Bolivia or Tunisia. Vertex’s chief executive officer received a total salary of around $19 million in 2017. This situation, in which children’s lives are held to ransom, must not continue. Vertex and NHS England must agree a deal soon, or an interim solution must be found, as happened in Scotland. Children’s lives must not continue to be held hostage. Tristan’s grandpa has already lost a son to this condition. There is simply no excuse for not prolonging and improving Tristan’s life. I will continue to campaign with Tristan and his grandpa, and Charlie and his parents, until this drug is made available to them and they are able to get on with their lives.

I will finish with a direct plea from Tristan’s grandpa, John Binns:

“We don’t have time – please don’t waste it. It’s costing lives and there are too many cystic fibrosis angels already.”

5.32 pm

Ian Austin (Dudley North) (Ind): We have been campaigning on this issue for well over four years; I think this is the fifth or sixth debate we have had in this Chamber or the main Chamber. We have met two Prime Ministers, two Health Secretaries and several Health Ministers. We have a new Health Minister with us today. We welcome her to her place, and we hope she will be able to unlock this issue in a way that her predecessors did not. I cannot remember how many cross-party letters we have delivered
to Downing Street. There have been countless meetings between MPs, Vertex and the Cystic Fibrosis Trust. However, four years after this drug was licensed, it still is not being made available to the people who need it.

Imagine how many people’s lungs have suffered irreparable damage in that period. Imagine how many people have seen not just the quality but the length of their life reduced over the past four years. I pay tribute to the brilliant people from the Cystic Fibrosis Trust who are with us today: David Ramsden, Nick Medhurst and the brilliant Lynsey Beswick, whom we heard about earlier. Most of all, I pay tribute to the army of parents and carers who work so hard on this issue all year round. We are in this room today because of the inspirational work they do. It is humbling and heartbreaking to meet them and listen to their stories.

I became involved in this issue because I met Carly Jeavons, whom the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam (Paul Scully) spoke about. She is from Dudley, and she took part in a clinical trial for Orkambi. Before being put on that trial, she had to choose between leaving work, with all the financial hardship that would cause, and struggling on in work with her health getting worse. She had to take 90 tablets and do two hours of physiotherapy a day. Her lung function was 44%. She had to spend two weeks in hospital every three months. That is not an unusual story, by the way, for people with cystic fibrosis.

Carly told me:

“Orkambi has changed my life. I quickly became well enough to start to live a more normal life again as a working mum. My health has remained stable... hospital visits have massively reduced,”

and unplanned admissions are now non-existent. Since she started having Orkambi, she has been able to go on holiday for the first time, she has got married, she has started a family and she has started a business. She makes a much bigger contribution to the economy.

People talk about the cost of providing these drugs; what about the contribution that people who are given Orkambi can make to the country and the economy? Let us think about that.

I did not really understand the impact that having a condition such as cystic fibrosis has on the rest of someone’s life. I mentioned Lynsey a moment ago. I hope she does not mind me telling everyone this. She has a three-year-old daughter, Eloise, who is a lovely young girl. I have had the great pleasure of meeting. She has a three-year-old daughter, Eloise, who is a lovely young girl I have had the great pleasure of meeting.

I want to talk about another affected family. My constituents Sadie Lawty and her husband Steve Sanders have a three-year-old daughter. Eloise. What is a lovely young girl I have had the great pleasure of meeting. She was diagnosed with cystic fibrosis when just two weeks old. It was a bombshell to Sadie and Steve, because as
far as they knew there was no family history of it. At the time, they were told there were many reasons to be hopeful, because a new family of pharmaceuticals that targeted the underlying causes of cystic fibrosis had recently been introduced. They were given hope, but their hope has been frustrated.

Orkambi has existed for the whole of Eloise’s life, and its positive effects are long established. The frustrating reality for Eloise and her family is that they are no closer to accessing it than when she was first diagnosed. As we heard in Jake’s case, there is never a day off when combating the condition. Medicines have to be administered around the clock and there are endless trips for assessments and treatments. In fact, while we are having this debate Eloise’s parents are taking her to the doctor’s for her annual review, essentially to find out how much damage has been caused by cystic fibrosis so far.

Accessing Orkambi could help sustain Eloise and offer her parents some longer-term peace of mind. It is not a wonder drug, but it is a source of hope, so it is frustrating for Eloise’s family that their hope has been dashed. Eloise is doing well at the moment; hopefully that will continue. She will start nursery soon. At three years old, she has a while before the cumulative effects of cystic fibrosis really set in, but many people cannot afford to wait much longer.

I think back to my first brush with the condition, when I had a girlfriend who was a nurse. She was looking after a very charming young man who sadly died while still in his teens. That brought home to me the personal tragedy involved with this condition. It is therefore vital that the Government take responsibility for pulling people together and finding a solution among NICE, the NHS and Vertex as quickly as possible.

There are potential ways forward. My hon. Friend the Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy) outlined solutions such as Crown use licences to overturn the monopoly and access to drugs through clinical trials. The Chair of the Health and Social Care Committee, the hon. Member for Totnes (Dr Wollaston), talked about the interim arrangements in Scotland, which may provide for a way forward. Whatever that way forward is, we need to find it.

I am pleased to see the Minister in her new role and hope that, as my hon. Friend the Member for Dudley North (Ian Austin) said, she will really grip on to this issue and try to find a solution that delivers for all the people I talked about, for the people who need the drug now, for the people in the Public Gallery, and in memory of the people who died. I plea with her to get the Government to get people around the table and find a solution.

5.43 pm

Mr Stephen Hepburn (Jarrow) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bailey. Like others, I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam (Paul Scully) for bringing about the debate and allowing us once again to give the Government a jog and tell them to get this sorted out once and for all. We are all aware of cystic fibrosis. It affects all of our constituencies. It is a life-limiting condition that affects more than 10,000 people in the UK. It is a condition with no cure as of yet, and half of those who have it will die before their 31st birthday.

We are also aware that there is a drug available. Orkambi, developed by Vertex, treats not only the symptoms associated with cystic fibrosis but the underlying causes. One of these patients is four-year-old Harriet Corr from Jarrow, whose parents Emma and Chris are here today. They desperately want a better quality of life for their daughter. They contacted me because they were frustrated and upset that Harriet could not get access to this life-changing drug as it is not available on the NHS in England. An even bigger blow to them is that if they lived an hour further north, in Scotland, Harriet could qualify for it next year. Why? The NHS in England and NICE do not deem the drug cost-effective and have spent more than two years negotiating a price, without success.

It is totally unacceptable that a country with the second highest number of sufferers, and one that leads the way in cystic fibrosis outcomes, now risks falling behind many other European countries and the USA and allowing people with the condition to become physically sicker than necessary all because an agreement on the economics of treatment cannot be reached. We all know that because of that we have had five parliamentary debates, and still there has been no action from the Government. These drugs need to be on the NHS now, because every day without them is another day of suffering for the people living with the condition.

If people want to focus on the economics, the evidence is clear. As Members have outlined, this treatment prevents the condition from escalating, thus preventing more expensive treatment further down the line. It would reduce the number of times patients used the NHS and hospitals throughout the year, which would obviously be a saving to the NHS and—more importantly—a better outcome for patients and their families.

Let us look at the human aspect of the debate. Families are well aware that access to the treatment is not a cure for the condition, but it certainly helps those affected live as normal and fulfilling a life as possible in the short time they are with us. The NICE appraisal methods fail to recognise that. How can a cost be placed on a child with cystic fibrosis and their ability to manage their condition, to go to school, to play with their friends, to go to university later on in life and get a job as well as easing the burden of care on their families and carers? Why should Harriet and her family not have a worthwhile quality of life and get to do the things many of us take for granted?

Time is running out for some patients, and we are culling on the Government to act now to resolve this matter urgently. I thank Members from across the House for pushing this case forward. I also pay tribute to the campaigners, who have fought hard, organised a petition and shouted so loudly that surely this Government, in the fifth or sixth richest country in the world, can no longer ignore them.

5.48 pm

Stephen Morgan (Portsmouth South) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bailey. Kick-starting a social media campaign, meeting local politicians and working tirelessly alongside organisations such as the Cystic Fibrosis Trust—do those sound like the actions of a five-year-old? Ivy Weir is a remarkable local campaigner who I am lucky to have living in my...
city. With the support of Gemma, her dedicated mother, Ivy lives with cystic fibrosis. She has carved a path into uncharted territory when it comes to accessing Orkambi.

Ivy helped me send out 650 letters to all MPs asking them to take part in the #StrawfieChallenge. She has been on national news, alongside her mother—committed campaigner Gemma Weir—calling for that change. She has helped deliver hundreds of letters to 10 Downing Street, calling for Orkambi to be free on the NHS. Ivy, Gemma and other CF activists have shown immense dedication and resilience in the face of adversity; now we in Westminster must do the same.

There have been five parliamentary debates about access to these medicines, yet we still see no light at the end of the tunnel. Over a year ago, the Prime Minister called for a speedy resolution to this emergency; there has still been no progress. We have the chance to improve the lives of thousands of people across our nation. There has been enough dialogue; now we need to see action.

As we have heard today, over 10,000 people in the UK live with cystic fibrosis—one in every 2,500 babies born. In the last four years, this genetic disorder has tragically claimed the lives of 210 people. What makes these figures more harrowing is that drugs are available to relieve many of the symptoms and greatly improve the standard of living for those with CF, including improving life expectancy.

Orkambi can make a real difference. The obstacle to the widespread implementation of these drugs is the cost; I find that morally repugnant. We live in a nation that forged an NHS from the ashes of world war two, that prides itself on universal healthcare for all and that is the envy of the world, because healthcare is free at the point of delivery and based on clinical need, not ability to pay. As such, the UK is a global bastion when it comes to cystic fibrosis outcomes. However, if Orkambi and other drugs are not rapidly added to the list of drugs available on the NHS, we will lose this valued status. Letting costs stand in the way of saving lives does a great disservice to the principles the NHS is rooted in: universality, equality and fairness.

The Health and Social Care Committee has done vital work in carving out potential ways forward. Its recent calls for interim access would allow negotiations to continue, without the unnecessary suffering of those living with CF. However, the non-binding nature of the suggestions means that three months on, no such agreement has been set in motion. Where NHS England and Vertex remain at loggerheads, NHS Scotland has established a deal with the pharmaceutical company. This will create a brutal postcode lottery. The level at which people suffer from cystic fibrosis is currently determined by where they live in the UK. I am confident that this was not the NHS envisaged by its founders nearly three quarters of a century ago.

I have seen the effects on my constituents in Portsmouth at first hand; I will make every effort to ensure their concerns are raised. In 2017, I wrote to the right hon. Member for South West Surrey (Mr Hunt) in his capacity as Secretary of State for Health, urging a swift response. In 2018, I wrote to the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, the right hon. Member for West Suffolk (Matt Hancock), on his appointment, asking him to do the same. In 2019, I wrote to the Prime Minister, asking her to intervene. Now is the time for leadership on this most pressing of matters. We must see progress and we must see it quickly.

It has been announced that Vertex Pharmaceuticals could potentially develop treatments for 90% of those who live with CF over the next five years. If solid, robust negotiating foundations are not established now, that could undermine patient access for generations. Today, I call on the Department of Health and Social Care, Vertex and the Prime Minister to make this a national priority and help to bring an end to the suffering of thousands of people across the UK.

5.54 pm

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bailey.

Leading up to this debate, I spoke to constituents, one of whom described the mental strain of knowing that a drug was available but could not be prescribed to their child. Another parent talked about the administration of 22 drugs, and the physio and hospital appointments that were needed, as well as the stress of their child being admitted to hospital. Their child is now 21 years old and there have been no changes, even though there is a miracle drug that could transform their life. Another constituent, Jack, who is seven years old and at the start of his journey, desperately wants hope for his future.

We are at the cutting edge of a generation of pharmaceutical breakthroughs that have the power to transform the lives of people who experience a range of medical diagnoses. It is an exciting point in our journey with medicine, and it could be transformative to patients and carers. To deny therapy is ethically abhorrent. Many Members today have said that this is about negotiation, but I say that negotiation is not the answer. We should not be wrestling over drugs time and time again; we need a completely different framework for addressing the cost of pharmaceuticals.

NICE needs an overhaul to ensure it is fulfilling its role and looking at patients’ life course. I know that it does that work, but it needs to look at its effectiveness over a patient’s life course and at the economic value it can bring not just to medicine, but to the wider economy. It also needs to ensure that the levers are in place for it to look at a portfolio of drugs, as opposed to looking at drugs one by one.

We need to understand how much the NHS can afford to pay for the benefits of new drugs, taking into account the health benefits that could be achieved with the money the NHS must find to pay for them. This assessment, based on a NICE appraisal, could inform a debate about national rebate agreements in the current pharmaceutical price regulation scheme. There are several costs involved: the manufacturing cost, the price the NHS can afford, the NICE assessment and the market price, which is driven primarily by the US market. That is a cause of frustration.

The argument among academics is that a mechanism for innovation; manufacturers that produced more effective
drugs at affordable prices would not need to pay a rebate, but those that charged more would pay a higher rebate. That would not impact the list price for the global market, and the rebate could be spread across the portfolio to provide better opportunities for manufacturers to bring new products to market.

That would take the politics out of NICE and NHS England. Canada is currently developing something similar, new products to market.

That would provide better opportunities for manufacturers not supply a product when its production costs mean it could do so without making a loss, it could lose its patent. That would provide the required leverage. We need to hold discussions about this not just across the sector, but with the European Medicines Agency; the impact could be greater with more countries on board.

People will have seen reports about the generic drug from Argentina, and we have heard about it in the debate today. We cannot allow inequality in access to pharmaceuticals in our country to grow, because it creates health inequalities. People who can pay will be able to afford that drug, and they will have better health outcomes. In the light of the ethics of the debate, the Department of Health and Social Care needs to move fast, now.

We need to be alert when it comes to trade deals with the United States, which is significant to the debate. The US will clearly want to drop the carrot of big pharma in front of Ministers, but that is a serious trap. The President talked about the NHS being “on the table” in his speech about trade negotiations, and we must be alert to the real agenda. It is through big pharma that we will get access to the NHS. As we have already heard, with respect to the size of the NHS drugs budget, that is a way of controlling it. We need to be on top of that.

Instead of drug-by-drug negotiation, we need a framework leading automatically to the leverage required to procure medicines. That will make such a difference. It will remove the uncertainty about different pharmaceuticals, as we move forward through the exciting developments that are taking place. Let us take the politics out of the process and enable NHS England and NICE to do their jobs, even under a new contract. I ask the Minister to do her job and to put a new framework in place.

6 pm

Laura Smith (Crewe and Nantwich) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship in this hugely important debate, Mr Hanson. I thank all the constituents who signed the petition, and those in the Public Gallery.

I am not surprised that my constituency featured so high up on the list of respondents, because my constituent, Elle Morris, became the face of a poster campaign this year pleading for life-changing drugs to be available to UK sufferers of cystic fibrosis. I was lucky and privileged to know Elle, who was from Nantwich, and to have her visit us here in Parliament. She sadly passed away in her parents’ arms at Great Ormond Street Hospital for Children on 3 January 2018.

Elle had undergone a successful double lung transplant in July 2017, but complications set in when microbacteria, which originally infected her lungs, got into her bones. Sadly, despite treatment, which included the removal of part of her sternum and rib cage, she passed away. Now her image is being used in a campaign pleading for others to get access to the potential life-prolonging treatment drug Orkambi. Her face has been displayed on four of the country’s largest digital screens, in Birmingham, the south-east, south London and Manchester, promoting #OrkambiNow. It goes without saying that we in Crewe and Nantwich are exceptionally proud of everything that Elle achieved in her short life, and all that she continues to achieve. Her campaign group, Elle’s Wishes, documented her brave journey, including her support, alongside the successful campaign run by the Daily Mirror, for opt-out organ donation.

Ahead of today’s debate I asked Elle’s mother Becky, a friend of mine, whether there was anything specific that she wanted me to mention to the Minister. Becky is an amazing credit to her daughter and continues to campaign tirelessly for CF sufferers. She said:

“Orkambi becoming available is so important to Elle’s memory and it would prevent future heartbreak and suffering to other CF patients and their families. It’s that step closer to maintaining health, and preventing more damage to a sufferer until a cure can be found. Organ donation is the only option currently and the cost is huge, and as we found not always successful as it suppressed the immune system which is vital for CF sufferers to keep strong and built up. If it was your child, would you do anything possible to keep them alive and as healthy as can be? Is there really a cost between a child and their health and their life? Elle was a true CF warrior and fought so hard. She appreciated life so much, the simple things like the countryside, school, spending time with her friends. She loved her home and her cups of tea. She could have potentially still been enjoying those things and looking forward to her 14th birthday in January 2020 but instead she didn’t reach her 12th birthday. Please, please, as a bereaved mother missing her beautiful daughter every day consider doing everything you can to help those that still have hope. Why should they suffer? Yours Becky Whitfield.”

I have many other constituents, as we all have, who are fighting CF or supporting family members who are suffering. It is frankly not good enough that Orkambi, which we all know can help to save lives, is not currently available on the NHS unless compassionate grounds are given. We have debated the subject before, and we know that cystic fibrosis affects about 10,400 children and adults in the UK, that Orkambi will change cystic fibrosis care for the better, and that it works for eight in 20 people. About 50% of individuals with cystic fibrosis in the UK have the genetic mutation that Orkambi can tackle, so the approval of Orkambi for use on the NHS could benefit about 5,200 people living with cystic fibrosis. Orkambi has been shown to slow decline in lung function by 42% and cut the number of infections requiring hospitalisation by 61%. It gives patients not only more control over their lives but a greater quality of life.

Orkambi is available for patients in other countries including Austria, Denmark, France, Germany, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Italy, Greece, and the United States. I agree with the Health and Social Care Committee that it is hugely disappointing that NHS England and Vertex are yet to come to an agreement. I ask the Minister to explain her understanding of the position that has been reached. The Scottish Medicines Consortium has managed to agree a figure, and we must do the same.

It is disgusting that, while children such as my constituent die from their condition, it is reported that a pharmaceutical giant such as Vertex can charge the NHS an unaffordable price for a life-changing drug and get a huge increase in
its revenue. Vertex reported that its net income more than doubled in the last quarter from $158 million to $337 million. It said that the jump in profits was “largely driven by the strong growth in total CF product revenues”. It is frankly disgraceful that we live in a world so driven by profit-making and the market that such companies can hold lives to ransom in that way. I challenge Vertex to waive confidentiality so as to give evidence for its claim to have made “the best offer in the world” to the NHS.

The NHS has made its proposals public. That big pharmaceutical firm must do the same if it is to have any chance of having the public’s confidence that it is behaving in an ethical way. Failing to do so only helps to build the case against the continuation of the marketised pharmaceuticals industry in its current form. Perhaps it is time for Government to reconsider their role in the sector and to intervene, with legislation or by other means, to prevent such situations, where profit margins become the primary concern, rather than the lives of children who suffer from CF, like Elle.

6.10 pm

**Clive Lewis** (Norwich South) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hanson. I add my thanks to the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam (Paul Scully) for securing this debate.

I will focus on two key things: asking the Minister a series of questions on potential remedies for this situation, but also using my time to speak about Rachael and Ethan, a mother and child in my constituency who are forced to live with the realities of cystic fibrosis every day, and the adverse impact that the actions of the company Vertex are having on their lives. Ethan is 11 years old. He has a big smile and loves pizza, trampolining and spending time with his friends, but sadly that is where the similarity to other 11-year-olds ends, since every day his life and that of his mum Rachael are dominated by the strain of dealing with cystic fibrosis.

To put this in context, because his lung function has declined to just 54%, in the past four weeks alone Ethan has coped with two separate full-day hospital admissions, 14 days of intravenous antibiotics, which are administered by his mum twice a day at home and take 45 minutes each time, and two sessions with a psychologist to help him to overcome needle phobia brought about by years of blood tests. All that is on top of his regular daily cocktail of medication and a physio session of a minimum of 22 minutes every day. Yet none of those treatments are designed to cure Ethan. They are simply designed to treat his symptoms—symptoms that are expected to get worse the older he gets. They attempt to slow down the irreversible lung damage that will slowly cause him to suffocate. He knows that. In 2017, half of all people who died with cystic fibrosis were under the age of 31, as has already been stated. It is a statistic that his mum Rachael is only too aware of as she spends the majority of her time caring for her son.

We know that Vertex drugs could change the lives of cystic fibrosis sufferers and their families, since they fix the underlying genetic mutations that cause the condition, but, as we have heard today, Vertex is more interested in 45% investor returns than in 20%. That seems to be its priority. Although the chronic underfunding of the NHS is a contributing factor in this story, it is by no means the only reason why a deal has not been reached. The unforgivable actions of Vertex Pharmaceuticals, which admittedly does important work in research and development relating to the treatment of cystic fibrosis, mean that it continues to put patients’ lives at risk as it seeks to extract the highest possible price from our NHS. When Alexander Fleming created penicillin, he had it publicly patented so that it was accessible to all, and it became a revolution in modern medicine. Should we not be legislating for pharmaceutical companies to do something similar and put patients, not profits, at the centre of their development?

I have a number of questions for the Minister. How do we approach this matter systematically, so that we are not back here time and time again, as we have heard? The reality is that we have a socialised—dare I say socialised—healthcare system, which treats people’s health on a collective basis, based not on their ability to pay, but on their need. That is quite revolutionary. However, that healthcare system operates in an international pharmaceutical industry based on rapacious profiteering. How do we square that circle? I suggest the answer lies at the European level, not the US level. Ultimately, the
EU’s being one of the biggest healthcare markets in the world gives the European Union immense clout in imposing its will on international pharmaceutical companies; that is one of the reasons I want to stay in it.

My other question is a philosophical one: what is a fair price for years of investment and research? Who determines what is a fair price—our collective democracies, which enable these companies to exist, or a handful of corporate executives whose primary motivation is to maximise profit? Who determines that price? At the moment, I do not think that the balance is correct.

Finally, has the Minister considered the use of compulsory licensing, allowing a UK company or other company to make cheap generic copies? That is allowed under World Trade Organisation rules; the definition of an emergency is up to the host country that needs to use it, and from initial research it is something that could be used and has been used before. I know that is not something she would want to do initially, but ultimately, would she consider it if Vertex refuses to move?

I will leave hon. Members with a quote from Ethan, who had his 11th birthday on 5 June. He said:

“I want to live a long life, because then I get to see some things and do things, so please fund The Triple”.

6.15 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam (Paul Scully) on setting the scene so well for us, and all the right hon. and hon. Members who have made such fantastic contributions on a subject in which we all have a deep interest.

This is an issue that I have spoken on many times in this Chamber and indeed outside it. I have received emails from constituents with photos of their children, begging me to do something to give these precious little ones a better quality of life. If ever we needed to be reminded of the importance of this for the children, as every hon. Member has said, that is such a reminder.

Let us be clear: cystic fibrosis is not only, tragically, a life-limiting disease, but a disease that massively impacts on the quality of life and the life experiences of the sufferers and their families, because the families live the children’s tragedy as well. Cystic fibrosis is one of the UK’s most common life-threatening inherited diseases. It is caused by a defective gene carried by one person in 25, usually without their knowing it. That is more than 2 million people in the UK, and if two carriers have a baby, the child has a one in four chance of having cystic fibrosis.

Around 10,400 people in the UK have cystic fibrosis; that is one in every 2,500 babies born. It affects some 100,000 people in the world. According to the most recent report from the UK Cystic Fibrosis Registry, based on people with CF who were recorded as alive from 2013 to 2017, half of people born with cystic fibrosis in 2017 were expected to live to at least 47, but the 132 people with CF who died in 2017 had a median age of 31. That is a massive difference and we cannot ignore it.

Parents are begging me, begging us, begging this House to ensure that those years are of the best possible quality. After numerous trials, some carried out with Northern Ireland constituents, Orkambi seems to be a drug that does exactly that for many people—enabling the best possible quality of life. My most recent correspondence from Richard Pengelly, the permanent secretary for health in Northern Ireland, outlined clearly that he does not have the power to do what we all need him to do and what he wants to do:

“Let me say that I share your disappointment that the progress in making this drug more widely available has not advanced as we had hoped. At the heart of this matter is the inability of the manufacturer Vertex to come to agreement with the relevant UK Health Technology Assessment bodies.”

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): When we have the most senior civil servant in Northern Ireland, along with NHS England and virtually everyone else who has any dealings with the issue, saying, “Look, we need action, we are powerless to move,” does that not throw the ball firmly back into the Government’s court to resolve the matter with the company?

Jim Shannon: I thank my hon. Friend for those words. This is not an easy subject for the Minister to respond to, but it is one that has captured the interest of us all on behalf of our constituents, and we need the Government to grasp that and move it forward to the next place. We look for that.

If the Republic of Ireland is able to come to some arrangement with Vertex, if the Scottish Parliament is able to do similar and if, according to the background information, it is possible to go to Argentina and buy a year’s course of drugs for one patient at £23,000, compared with £104,000 for a year’s supply here, that tells me that something can be done if we had the willpower to do it, as my hon. Friend the Member for East Londonderry (Mr Campbell) has said. We can look around at our UK neighbours and look toward Scotland, whose Government have reached an agreement with Vertex.

The permanent secretary went on to say:

“...in making decisions about access to new drugs.”

I say to the Minister that I have made a comment about the Republic of Ireland, but I also make a comment about Scotland, because I think that the process enables us to use what Scotland has done as an example for us elsewhere.

The permanent secretary continued:

“The Department is aware that Vertex have re-applied to the SMC for consideration of approval for Orkambi, and that in the meantime there is currently limited access to the drug in Scotland via their PACS.”

peer approved clinical system—

“Tier 2 scheme, which is broadly analogous to our Individual Funding Request Process. If Orkambi is approved by the SMC, details of the funding models in place, which are currently bound by commercial confidentiality, will be shared with the other UK countries. This will allow for us to have full access to the evidence and costs associated with this therapy and will inform any further decisions on access.”

The hon. Member for Colne Valley (Thelma Walker) referred to the destruction of some medications. Whatever the reason for that was—whether they had run out of
time or whatever—I think it is disgraceful that people have destroyed some medicines rather than letting them be used by the general public, by those who need them. If that is not unacceptable in this day and age, I do not know what is. It is absolutely disgraceful; it really annoys me.

It is simply terrible that we are in a position where our hand are tied. I say again to the Government: look to your Scottish counterparts. I firmly believe that we can and must do more from this place and that that must start with acknowledging that the NICE guidelines do not currently take into account the differences, when it comes to pricing, between treatments for rare diseases and a new antibiotic strain. We need a new form of assessment for rare diseases and I would like to see that taking place as soon as possible to ensure that the mummy of my two-year-old constituent, who is asking me for this drug in order to give her child as normal a life as possible, can look forward to securing the best for her child. That is what every Member has said here today on behalf of their constituents.

Again according to the background information that I have, in May 2019 the Government said in response to Vertex, NHS England and NICE were ongoing. You know something? They have been ongoing for more than a year. Let’s get them sorted. Time is passing fast. I am joining colleagues in asking the Department to make the administrative changes necessary to end the Orkambi stalemate with NICE and to put in place a body designed specifically to address rare disease patients and their needs. We acknowledge that NICE does a tremendous job in ensuring that safe, cost-effective medicines are available on prescription, but we need a different set-up for those whose illnesses are very different and for the sake of my constituents and those represented by other MPs who have spoken today. I am asking that those decisions be taken and the changes made to enable Richard Pengelly, the permanent secretary at the Department of Health in Northern Ireland, to do what he knows he needs to do and allow the prescription of Orkambi to those whose lives would be radically altered and enhanced by it. It would give them life-changing opportunities. As others have said, give those children a chance.

David Hanson (in the Chair): The previous Chair set a time limit on speeches of six minutes, which has been successful, in that all right hon. and hon. Members have been able to take part in the debate, but it leaves us with a maximum of one hour and 10 minutes for the Front-Bench speakers to respond. Front-Bench speakers, who have more than the normal 10 minutes, can be more flexible and take interventions should they so wish.

The other point I wish to make is that because the winding-up speeches have started early, some Members who have spoken in the debate are not present for these speeches and they should be. If you are watching on television, please return to the Chamber now. This is an important debate; you have contributed to it and you should be present for the Front-Bench responses.

6.23 pm

Marion Fellows (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hanson. I thank the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam (Paul Scully) for setting out in his opening speech facts that a lot of us did not know and facts that some of us did. It was a very useful start to this wide-ranging and well attended debate. I will just ask this question, though: how many times do we have to debate this very serious subject?

Again, I have to declare a personal interest. I am a cystic fibrosis carrier. My late husband was, too. My children are carriers, and my granddaughter, Saoirse Grace, has cystic fibrosis—mutations F508del and D1152H. I do not understand to any great degree what the last part of that actually means, but I do know that she is not the worst sufferer of cystic fibrosis. She has the best kind, if you like. She is pancreatic sufficient, and for that we are always grateful. Saoirse will not directly benefit from Orkambi, but along with 90% of people with cystic fibrosis in the UK, she will benefit from the triple therapy coming down the line. Those therapies will deliver unprecedented improvements in acute lung health and reductions in pulmonary exacerbations—a key driver of decline.

Approximately 900 people in Scotland live with cystic fibrosis. NHS Scotland estimates that one in 24 Scots has a CFTR mutation, which, if carried by both parents, would lead to a child being born with cystic fibrosis. England has the highest prevalence of cystic fibrosis in the world, with 1% of the world’s population but 12% of the world’s CF population.

There should be no postcode lottery for treatment. The UK Government should follow the Scottish Government’s lead on cystic fibrosis treatment. For people in England to receive Orkambi, NHS England would need to pay Vertex £500 million over five years and £1 billion over the next 10 years. However, in a debate on CF and Orkambi last year, it was stated that the costs of Orkambi can be offset by reduced hospital admissions, and other benefits should also offset the cost, as has been stated in the Chamber today. Vertex has stated that its offer to NHS England for the provision of its CF drugs represents the lowest price for Vertex’s portfolio of CF drugs in any country in the world. I point out that I am not here to make a case for Vertex; I am here to make a case for people with CF who need this drug.

The Scottish Government recently announced that NHS Scotland and Vertex Pharmaceuticals had reached a deal to provide interim access to Orkambi and Symkevi, through a system known as peer approved clinical system tier 2, while the Scottish Medicines Consortium reviews the relevant evidence for Orkambi. PACS tier 2, introduced by the Scottish Government in June 2018, involves an individual application for patient access to drugs not recommended by the SMC and not routinely available on the NHS.

The Scottish National party believes that the UK Government need to do more to facilitate interim access to Orkambi and other drugs to treat cystic fibrosis and to get NICE to re-evaluate making the drug more widely available for people living with the illness. In England, NICE said Orkambi was too expensive for the NHS in 2016, and since then Vertex and NICE have been unable to reach an agreement that will bring these drugs to patients. The UK Government are showing a lack of flexibility by only urging Vertex Pharmaceuticals to fully re-engage with the NICE appraisal process and to accept the offer that the NHS made in July 2018. Vertex has said that the methods used by the Scottish Government to obtain the drugs reflect the innovative nature of medicines that have the potential to extend
life for patients with rare diseases such as cystic fibrosis, and that it is hopeful that, through that process, all eligible patients in Scotland could have access to its medicines soon. If Orkambi and Symkevi are accepted by the SMC, which makes decisions independently of the Scottish Government, eligible patients in Scotland could have access to these precision CF medicines in 2019.

In the interim, Vertex and the Scottish Government have agreed a confidential discount that would be applied to approved PACS tier 2 applications. The Scottish Government also asked Vertex to provide access to the medicines at a discounted price to the list price while they finished the contract negotiations, and Vertex said, “Of course.” Vertex stated that it would be willing to do exactly the same thing in England.

There is agreement across the Chamber that Orkambi, Symkevi and Vertex’s triple therapy should be available UK-wide. I have no desire to get into the argument between NICE and Vertex in England. I want England to do what Scotland has done. I want children across the UK to get the benefits of these drugs. As has been said, this problem will exist whatever view we hold of Government at the UK level. However, political will must be exercised in the process of getting those with cystic fibrosis the drugs that will improve their lives and futures.

Finally—I will not take too long, Mr Hanson—I give my heartfelt thanks to all the parents and guardians of CF sufferers, and to those affected by cystic fibrosis, for their continuous campaigning and awareness-raising. It is awful that they have to keep doing that. I ask the Minister, please do not let their work be in vain.

6.31 pm

Mrs Sharon Hodgson (Washington and Sunderland West) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hanson, in this very important debate. I thank the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam (Paul Scully) for opening this debate on behalf of the Petitions Committee and for his excellent opening speech, in which he took many interventions. I thank all hon. Members for their passionate contributions. I counted more than a dozen speeches by Back Benchers, but I lost count, because I was distracted by the mouse that joined us. Given that it has been such a busy day in the main Chamber, this debate has shown how important this issue is to the House, as well as to all our constituents who have signed this important e-petition.

Access to drugs for patients with cystic fibrosis is an issue that is incredibly important to us all. I congratulate, in particular, my hon. Friends the Members for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy) and for Jarrow (Mr Hepburn), and the hon. Member for Dudley North (Ian Austin) on their tireless campaigning on this issue, along with patients, campaigners and charities, such as the Cystic Fibrosis Trust. I commend the trust for its expert briefings and support to patients and their families over many years.

Finally, I thank the 108,144 people who signed this e-petition, 310 of whom live in my constituency. As has been said, we debated a similar e-petition in March 2018, and there have already been five parliamentary debates about access to such medicines. I hoped, as others did, that by now cystic fibrosis patients would have access to the drugs that they need and deserve. Unfortunately, that has not been the case.

Just over a year ago, on 16 May 2018, in response to a question from my hon. Friend the Member for Erith and Thamesmead (Teresa Pearce), the Prime Minister called for a “speedy resolution” to the crisis. However, the only speedy thing has been the deterioration of the health of cystic fibrosis sufferers while they wait for a resolution of the crisis.

More than 10,000 people in the UK live with cystic fibrosis, and it is thought that around 50% of CF patients could benefit from Orkambi; that is more than 5,000 people. Although that is a lot of people, in NHS terms it is a small cohort. And yet Orkambi is still not available to patients, despite being licensed for use in the UK since 2015.

The UK is currently a world leader in cystic fibrosis outcomes, but that is changing. People with cystic fibrosis are physically sicker than they would be if these medicines were available to them. NHS England continues to make offers to Vertex, including the largest ever financial commitment in its 70-year existence, but that was rejected. Since then, an even better offer has been made, but again Vertex has been unwilling to accept it.

I know that that is frustrating for patients and their families, who have waited years for access to these life-saving drugs. We are all frustrated on their behalf. As my hon. Friend the Member for Colne Valley (Thelma Walker) mentioned, in March it was reported in the news that nearly 8,000 packs of Orkambi had been destroyed because they were past their sell-by date. That would have particularly stung patients and their families. Those drugs were valued by Vertex at £104,000 per patient per year. With my limited maths skills, I reckon that means that more than £60 million of drugs were destroyed by Vertex—drugs that could have been given to patients.

It is an outrage that Vertex would destroy so many packs of a life-saving drug while in a cost dispute with NHS England. So many patients could have benefited from those drugs. It was spiteful of Vertex to watch those drugs go out of date so they would have to be destroyed. In the midst of all that, Vertex reported a 40% rise in its revenues, with net income doubling in the previous quarter. I am sure I am not alone in feeling shocked and angry at that.

By refusing to play fair with NHS England, Vertex is holding lives at ransom, and patients and their families are the ones left suffering. Therefore, I was not surprised by the feature on “Newsnight” last week about parents and families establishing a cystic fibrosis buyers’ club to buy the generic drug Lucaftor from Argentina. The stress and frustration that families face because of Vertex mean that they now feel they have no other option but to take matters into their own hands.

Laura Smith: It is great to hear my hon. Friend’s response. It seems perverse to me that the interests of big pharmaceutical companies can hold such enormous sway in this country, to the extent that cystic fibrosis sufferers can be left without their treatment—treatment that has the potential to prolong their lives significantly.

Mrs Hodgson: I agree with my hon. Friend. I hope that the Minister will have some ideas about how this drug company can be held to account and not be allowed to continue in this way. I hope the Minister agrees that the situation should never have been allowed to get to this stage.
Lucaftor has the same active ingredients as Orkambi, and the Argentinian pharmaceutical company Gador is offering a price of £23,000 per patient per year, which drops to £18,000 if patients and their families can get together a group of more than 500 patients to purchase Lucaftor as a collective. That is significantly lower than the £104,000 Vertex wants for Orkambi. I say “want” deliberately—it is not the cost, but what Vertex wants. Of course, for many patients in the UK, Lucaftor will still be way too expensive to access, so it is not a feasible alternative at all. That is why NHS England and Vertex need to come to a conclusion that puts cystic fibrosis patients first, and ensures that they have access to the life-saving drugs they need and deserve.

Kerry McCarthy: I thank my hon. Friend. Friend for all her support on this issue. I agree that the issue with the Argentinian solution is that in a buyers’ club where people have to pay privately, the drugs will still be out of reach for many people. However, the fact that Gador is offering this drug for so much less than Vertex is charging for a similar product means that the NHS could, if it decided to trial the drug, buy it for 4,000 patients who would benefit from Orkambi. Therefore, no one would have to pay for it privately. The NHS could fund it, but at much less than Vertex is asking for. I ask the Minister: why is that not the solution?

Mrs Hodgson: I was going to come on to that, but if a point is worth making once, it is worth making twice. I will make it to the Minister as well, so she will have plenty of time to think about it.

As we all agree, patients and their families should not be put in the position—as some are—of having to pay thousands of pounds for their treatment. Family income should not determine who lives and who dies. That is why the NHS was founded—so that all could have access to the same excellent treatment, regardless of means. That was true 70 years ago when the NHS was formed, and it is still true today.

As the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam pointed out, our NHS is there for us all and should not be held to ransom by a pharmaceutical company, but neither should access be denied because of unfit processes and systems in the NHS. Over the years, as a shadow public health Minister, I have met many patient groups, including those with cystic fibrosis, who are missing out on life-changing medicines because their condition is not rare enough and is therefore not deemed by NICE to be cost-effective. We need an appraisal process that is fit for purpose and that will capture rare diseases such as cystic fibrosis effectively.

Without drugs such as Orkambi, patients and their families are being harmed physically and psychologically. Every day without the drugs that patients need makes their condition worse and threatens their lives. What steps will the Minister take to ensure that patients with rare diseases have access to the medicines that they need and deserve? It is about access not just to Orkambi, but to other precision medications such as Symkevi and the next generation of cystic fibrosis drugs that could help patients who are suffering.

Vertex recently announced the headline results for its fourth cystic fibrosis medicine, a triple combination therapy that could radically transform the lives of nine in 10 people who live with cystic fibrosis in the UK, delivering unprecedented improvements in acute lung health. That is amazing news, but patients fear that they will never be able to access this ground-breaking drug. I urge Vertex to put patients first and consider the real-life impact of this cost dispute on patients and their families.

Vertex and NHS England must come to an agreement urgently, because patients have already waited far too long. If an arrangement cannot be made soon, will the Minister personally step in and pursue the alternatives that my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol East mentioned, such as a Crown use licence or a clinical trial? Cystic fibrosis patients need urgent access now to the drug that they have been denied for three years. It is time the Government considered all alternatives.

6.42 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Seema Kennedy): It is always a particular pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hanson. I thank my hon. Friend. Friend for all her support on this issue. I agree that the issue with the Argentinian solution is that in a buyers’ club where people have to pay privately, the drugs will still be out of reach for many people. However, the fact that Gador is offering this drug for so much less than Vertex is charging for a similar product means that the NHS could, if it decided to trial the drug, buy it for 4,000 patients who would benefit from Orkambi. Therefore, no one would have to pay for it privately. The NHS could fund it, but at much less than Vertex is asking for. I ask the Minister: why is that not the solution?

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I have been very touched by the stories of patients and their families that we have heard today and the compassion shown by my hon. Friend and all hon. Members in speaking about cystic fibrosis. I also pay tribute to my young constituent Lucy Baxter, who was on “BBC Breakfast” this morning and who lives with cystic fibrosis. She spoke to me very soon after I became a Member of Parliament and is an absolute inspiration to me and to the whole cystic fibrosis community.

Today’s debate has been heartfelt and passionate. The stories that we have heard clearly make the case that Orkambi and other drugs for people with cystic fibrosis should be available on the NHS at a price that is fair and affordable. The Government and I share that view. As the Chair of the Health and Social Care Committee, the hon. Member for Totnes (Dr Wollaston), set out so clearly, we must remember that the NHS must use its budget fairly for the good of all patients. That is why we rightly have a system whereby experts, not politicians, determine the fair price for medicines, based on robust evidence. That system has helped many thousands of patients to benefit from rapid access to effective new medicines.

Karl Turner: Forgive me, but I genuinely do not know the answer to this—I find it completely confusing. If the Republic of Ireland and Scotland can get an interim agreement, why cannot we sort this out for patients here in England?

Seema Kennedy: I will talk about the interim measures, but I think the more important thing that we need to grasp is having a permanent solution for everybody living with cystic fibrosis.
Throughout the negotiations, which are rightly being led by NHS England, the Government have been crystal clear that Vertex must re-engage with the NICE process. I know that hon. Members have questions about that process, and I will try to address some of the points that have been raised. The hon. Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell) raised more detailed points for me to consider; if I do not address them, I will write to her with more detail, but there are some points about the NICE process that I will address later in my remarks.

Jim Shannon: Would it be possible for the Minister to give her Department’s and her own opinion on the decisions?

Seema Kennedy: I shall turn later in my speech to that specific avenue that some sufferers have gone down.

Dr Wollaston: The Minister referred to the importance of Vertex engaging with NICE. Does she share my concern that when I wrote to Vertex and NICE about the failure to make progress, Vertex assured me that it had contributed “substantial new evidence” on the three products in question, yet I subsequently heard from NICE that it had received only “an overview of the clinical evidence”, rather than genuine engagement? Will she join me in calling on Vertex to properly engage with the process, so that we can get the full evidence base on which to make these decisions?

Seema Kennedy: I agree with the Chair of the Health and Social Care Committee and urge Vertex to re-engage with the NICE process. To date, unfortunately, it has continued to refuse to accept the process or has suggested unacceptable conditions on the NICE value assessment of its product, which would render the outcome meaningless. That comes despite NHS England’s latest proposals offering to reimburse Vertex ahead of a positive NICE recommendation, which for a deal of this size is unprecedented; agreeing to implement real-world data collection, as the Committee has called for, to help Vertex to demonstrate the value of its medicines; and offering significantly increased prices in comparison with their offer last July.

NICE has a 20-year history and is internationally renowned and independent. Its methods and processes for the development of its guidance have been in place for 20 years, but it recognises that it needs to evolve. It continues to review its procedures to ensure that they remain fit for purpose; it is now undertaking a review of its technology appraisal methods in line with the commitment in the 2019 voluntary scheme, and it encourages all stakeholders to engage. NICE has recommended 75% of the drugs for rare diseases—some of which I will touch on later—that have been assessed through its technology appraisal programme for the eligible patient population.

Last week, the Association of the British Pharmaceutical Industry made it clear that “NICE is the cornerstone of NHS efforts to ensure the price being charged by a company represents the value being delivered.” Commenting on the current situation, it said that “the APBI would always encourage companies to fully engage with NICE at all stages of the process.” Furthermore, it commented on the current structure of NHS England’s proposed deal with Vertex, saying that “the structure of the offer represents exactly the sort of flexibility the industry has been calling for, for some time.”

However, Vertex is willing to accept only its own valuation of Orkambi; I draw your attention, Mr Hanson, to comments directed at Vertex by Members from across the House, including those made by the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson).

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): I am grateful to the Minister for giving way and I apologise for not being here at the beginning of the debate, because of important statements in the main Chamber.

My constituent William Smith, who is a pupil at Cooper Perry Primary School, has cystic fibrosis. Along with his entire class, he presented me with the facts of his case and with letters to the Government, and they made it quite clear that they expect not only the Government but Vertex to come to a decision on this matter. Is it not absolutely vital that a company such as Vertex should engage with the Government given that the lives and futures of people such as William Smith, my 10-year-old constituent, are at stake?

Seema Kennedy: My hon. Friend makes a very good point. Members from across the House have told very moving stories of their constituents, the lives they lead, and the stresses and the strains put on them by the lack of an agreement on this matter. However, other drug companies are developing medications for rare diseases, and agreements have been reached on those. I will turn to them very shortly.

We can look at what happened in Spain earlier this year, when Vertex did not accept the terms of Spain’s health outcome-related proposal. The Spanish proposal, which is similar to the recent NHS England offer, is based on the ongoing collection and interpretation of real world data. Why is that not acceptable to Vertex? I also note that dialogue between Spain and Vertex has been ongoing for three years, which is similar to the situation here in England.

We will never walk away, but Vertex must now agree to engage with NICE and we urge it to accept all the flexibilities that NHS England has put on the table. There is nothing unusual about Vertex that means that this is not the right thing for it to do. Recently, we have seen deals reached as part of the NICE appraisal process, including that for ocrelizumab, which is an innovative multiple sclerosis drug; that for Spinraza, which is for people with spinal muscular atrophy; and that for axicabtagene ciloleucel chimeric antigen receptor t cell, or CAR-T, treatments.

Given that Vertex remains an extreme outlier in both pricing and behaviour, it is no wonder that patients and families have been looking at alternative solutions to secure access to this drug, and we have heard about the buyers’ club. Hon. Members have also talked about Crown use licensing, and the hon. Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy) talked about large-scale clinical trials.

Unless Vertex changes its approach and behaves responsibly, I have a moral obligation to look at these other options. Of course NHS England and NICE will...
carry on the negotiations, because a negotiated outcome is the desired option. However, I have no alternative but to look at these other options on the table.

Clive Lewis: I thank the Minister for giving way. I raised the issue of compulsory licensing, which the Government have within their armoury. Of course it would be a measure of last resort, but given that we are dealing with people’s lives, the quality of their lives and a company that is quite simply being intransigent, and greedy, surely that option should be considered. That would send a message to those pharmaceutical companies—that global pharma industry—that if they are going to be greedy and put people’s lives at risk, despite being made fair offers, this option could be used by our Government.

Seema Kennedy: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. As my hon. Friend the Member for Sutton and Cheam said in his opening speech, which was very well made, we recognise the importance of British pharmaceutical companies and that companies invest hugely in developing new drugs. However, as the other examples of drugs for rare diseases that I have given show, it is possible to go through the NICE appraisal process and reach an agreement with NHS England. As one hon. Member who is no longer in their place said, this is an offer for a long-term agreement.

Vertex is an outlier, and I would like to put that on the record.

Mrs Hodgson: Will the Minister give way on that point?

Seema Kennedy: Yes, and I hope that I will be able to remember the hon. Lady’s question.

Mrs Hodgson: At this point I should clarify, for the benefit of the campaigners who I have spoken to about the Crown use licensing option, that it is not an immediate solution from their point of view; I understand that it would take at least a couple of years. If an agreement can be reached, there would be an immediate outcome. That is why the campaign is called Orkambi Now; it is about trying to get the drug now. Although the Crown use licensing option would be an option to consider if nothing else can be found, it would not give the sufferers and their families the drugs as quickly as we would like.

Seema Kennedy: As always, the shadow Minister makes an excellent point. Crown use licensing is not something that any Government would consider lightly. It is very rarely used in health. It has probably not been used—my officials will correct me if I am wrong—since the 1970s.

The ideal thing is to get a deal, and deals have been done with other pharmaceutical companies; that is the point I want to make. As I have said, Vertex is an outlier in this regard, but that does not mean that I do not have an obligation to look at other options. I will do that.

Kerry McCarthy: Will the Minister give way?

Seema Kennedy: Can I just make a tiny bit of progress first?

Kerry McCarthy: It is on this issue.

Seema Kennedy: All right, given that we have more than half an hour left.

Kerry McCarthy: I really welcome the fact that the Minister is saying so passionately that she feels she has a moral obligation to act. The question is: when? I say that because Vertex has been in these talks for a very long time now. How much longer will it be given before the Minister decides to look at the other options?

Seema Kennedy: Well, I have already said it, so I suppose that means—

Kerry McCarthy: When?

Seema Kennedy: Now. We will look at other options to consider other methods we can use. As the hon. Member for Washington and Sunderland West said, Crown use licensing has other risks, so the best option is to get a deal. However, we will look at other methods that might enable families to receive the drugs they need.

Some Members have said that Orkambi is available in other countries and asked, “So why not here?” Although that is true, it is also true that other countries have faced problems in agreeing an acceptable price with Vertex; around 50% of the global cystic fibrosis population is unable to access Orkambi. It is not approved for reimbursement in Spain, which I have touched on, or in Portugal, and it is not used routinely in France. It is also of note that the Canadian equivalent of NICE has rejected the drug, saying that the benefit of Orkambi is small and uncertain.

We do not have sight of specific commercial agreements where Orkambi is approved and we do not have the same population needs, as we know, because of the specific population that the UK has; compared with other countries, the UK has a very high proportion of people with cystic fibrosis. So I am not able to make comparisons with other countries. Cystic fibrosis affects about 10,500 people in the United Kingdom—a far higher figure than in other countries. It represents 12% of the global cystic fibrosis population. The UK is a very important market for Vertex.

I thank all Members who have spoken so passionately here today. In particular, I thank the people who have joined us here in the Gallery; I pay tribute to them for all that they do to support their family members. I also thank those people, such as Lucy Baxter, who work so hard to raise awareness of this issue. I thank members of the Health and Social Care Committee, which is carrying out a very thorough and transparent inquiry into this issue, helping to shine a light on it.

As we have heard in great and moving detail today, cystic fibrosis is a devastating, life-limiting condition, and the bravery of those affected should be an inspiration to us all. Drugs that improve sufferers’ quality of life should be available where appropriate, and I urge Vertex to do everything it can to price its medicines fairly and in a way that reflects the health benefits to patients.

NHS England and NICE will, of course, continue their efforts to reach an agreement with Vertex. Access to treatment for all patients is, and always will be, a priority for this Government. My Department has a moral obligation to look at other options now, and that is what we shall do.

6.59 pm

Paul Scully: You have joined us halfway through the debate. Mr Hanson, and it is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship.
I thank all colleagues across the Chamber for their contributions. I thank the Cystic Fibrosis Trust for pulling together such a fantastic and insightful meeting this morning, and all those who participated, including the Minister’s constituent, Lucy Baxter. Lucy described cystic fibrosis phenomenally well, capturing it in one sentence: it is like breathing through a straw and then going running. It is that tiny lung capacity that really starts to illustrate the issue that these people live through, from day to day.

We have heard a lot about NICE and possible changes for that portfolio drug—system proposals. We have heard a lot about the need for Vertex to yield somewhat in the negotiations; as the Minister said, it is the outlier. I caution colleagues as they look at the alternatives, whether Crown use, compulsory licensing or a buyers’ club. Yes, we need those weapons in our armoury for the negotiations, but there is always the possible unintended consequence of fallout—the risk for future research into rare diseases of all sorts—if we start to undermine a market that clearly, however, needs to be looked at in relation to big pharma and how it can hold the NHS over a barrel. We just have to be careful about unintended consequences.

I also thank Alasdair Mackenzie, the Community and Outreach Engagement manager for Parliament. He joined me this morning at the deliberations with the Cystic Fibrosis Trust because of his personal interest. His partner, Becky, died of cystic fibrosis just a few years ago. His insight, and his sharing of Becky’s experience, were invaluable to me in my contributions this morning.

I wish, again, to put on the record my thanks, and to give all speed to the Minister, NICE and NHS England in our negotiations with Vertex. I hope that we can bring this matter to a resolution and give that life-saving drug—that quality-of-life drug—to all those thousands of people across the country as soon as possible.

Resolved,

That this House has considered e-petition 231602 relating to access to Orkambi and other drugs for people with cystic fibrosis.

7.1 pm

Sitting adjourned.
Westminster Hall

Tuesday 11 June 2019

[Mr Laurence Robertson in the Chair]

Social Mobility: Treasury Reform

9.30 am

Justine Greening (Putney) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered social mobility and Treasury reform.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Robertson. I called this debate because I passionately believe that this country’s most powerful and most important resource is its people, and it is simply unacceptable that in the 21st century we still do not have equality of opportunity for people in Britain.

I am someone who knows what it is like not to have all the opportunities you want on the doorstep and not to be connected to those opportunities. I came into politics to get change on the ground for people. That is why about a year ago, with the Harrison Centre for Social Mobility, I established the social mobility pledge—to get action on the ground, working with businesses.

Hundreds of businesses have now stepped up to the plate to provide more opportunity for more young people, by getting into schools and helping to raise aspiration, talking about careers, allowing young people to come into the workplace to get work experience or apprenticeships and, crucially, looking at recruitment practices. Those companies are making sure that their approach on recruitment means they are open to all the talent out there. Hundreds of companies are involved. Already, social mobility pledge companies collectively employ more than 2.5 million people.

That work has taken me all over the country, from Sunderland to Hull, from Bradford to Manchester. With those companies and organisations, we are a coalition of the willing. We are finding out what works on the ground and are then spreading that insight and knowledge further and faster and creating a race to the top. The social mobility pledge is doing practical work to get more opportunity to millions of young people. I thank the businesses and organisations that are part of it, and part of this push.

This is a debate about social mobility and, of course, I noticed the announcement from the great leader, Jeremy Corbyn, at the weekend, ditching improving social mobility. I am sure the shadow Minister will want to respond on that, but clearly social mobility is just a distraction from the class war that Corbyn’s Labour party is engaged in.

Mr Laurence Robertson (in the Chair): Order. Could the right hon. Lady please refer to Members by their constituency?

Justine Greening: Of course. The right hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn) has the sense, I think, that aspiration is a dirty word and is therefore not something that other people should feel is a good thing. That is wrong.

Lyn Brown (West Ham) (Lab): I was going to wait until my contribution to respond to the right hon. Lady, but it is quite clear that that is not the policy of the Labour party or of my right hon. Friend the Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn). We want as many people as possible to do well, not just a chosen few in a grammar-school society of the type the right hon. Lady proposes.

Justine Greening: I thought the hon. Lady would probably say that. Unfortunately, that illustrates that the Opposition have not understood what social mobility means. It means equality of opportunity. It would probably be better—this is why I raised the point—if we stopped arguing about semantics and started talking about finding common ground on how to get change for the better for millions of young people and communities currently disconnected from opportunity or too far from it. If this just becomes a debate on semantics, which is what I worry the right hon. Member for Islington North is trying to turn it into, we will not get anywhere fast. I will come on to why that is a problem, but the topic of this debate is that, while there are broader problems around how we debate achieving social mobility, which is why it has not happened, there is a bigger problem, which is about how the Government approach social mobility and the Treasury’s place within that.

Let us be absolutely clear: achieving social mobility means we achieve equality of opportunity for everyone in our country, irrespective of where they start, who they are and what their background is. It is not—I repeat, not—just about the gifted few.

I want to see system change. I have talked about the practical work I am doing on the ground with businesses and organisations through the social mobility pledge, outside of the Government, but if we are to finally crack the nut—unlike the Labour party, I do not believe we should give up trying to achieve social mobility—we have to ensure change inside the Government. To my mind, that starts with the Treasury, and that is why I called this debate.

After eight years in government, overwhelmingly as a Cabinet Minister and running three different Departments, my conclusion is that we effectively need to abolish the Treasury in its current form. What we have right now is dysfunctional and not fit for purpose. It does not achieve the transformation in opportunity and social mobility that Britain needs.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): I congratulate the right hon. Lady on securing this debate. She has a long interest in the topic. She referred to the abolition of the Treasury. Has she indicated that to the 10 Conservative hopefuls for Prime Minister?

Justine Greening: I will set out my wider strategy on why I think the Treasury in its current form is not fit for purpose. I hope in holding the debate that some of the arguments will get cut-through. If we are here to improve lives, for young people in particular, and to connect those young people to opportunity, things have to radically change, including in government. We need fundamental change in how the Government look at and invest taxpayers’ money, and that means the Treasury.

Nigel Huddleston (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on securing this debate and on her work on social mobility over many years.
I think, like me, she was comprehensively educated—like many on the Conservative Benches—and joined the Conservative party precisely because we are the party of opportunity and aspiration. On the point raised by the hon. Member for East Londonderry (Mr Campbell), does she agree that we need to put pressure on the Conservative candidates to make sure that investment in education, which is a key enabler of social mobility, is a hot topic and something that every single one of them should have as a top priority should they become leader?

Justine Greening: I agree. I am setting out how to fix the underlying problem of why we are underinvesting in people in our country and their potential. That starts with the Treasury. In my view, the Treasury has a twofold problem—first, how it operates across Government and, secondly, its policy approach.

On how it operates, it starts going wrong with the Treasury—UK plc’s finance department—having its own separate strategy from the Prime Minister, the chief executive. We have seen this down the years. It is traditional to see Chancellors at loggerheads with their Prime Ministers. We would never see a finance director able to countermand the CEO and undermine their strategy in any other organisation, yet that is exactly what we see, year to year and day to day. It has happened under Governments of every colour with the Treasury, as it is currently set up. Time and again, we end up with a Prime Minister, who is meant to be running the country, with one strategy, and a Chancellor with a different one, and both at loggerheads and going nowhere fast. It is no wonder that Prime Ministers do not get to deliver their strategies when the finance Department has an entirely separate one.

Parliament has a Budget speech every single year; it is essentially the Government’s strategy statement to Parliament and MPs for the year. It is not, however, the Prime Minister who delivers the strategy statement; it is the Chancellor. That does not make sense at all. Of course, these Budget statements are traditionally packed with politically driven, willy-waving, “look-at-me” projects for the Treasury. Most are not even Treasury ideas. The best ideas are hoovered up from every other Secretary of State running Departments across Government, and they are generally not even the Treasury’s. Worst of all, most of these excellent policy announcements—for example, the one that we made a couple of years ago on vocational education and T-levels—are held up in order to wait for the Chancellor to announce them in a Budget statement. That is entirely dysfunctional, and it has to stop.

We should abolish the Budget statement in its current form, as delivered by the Chancellor. By all means, let us downgrade it and have it as a very important, but secondly, annually, altogether, its presentation of the nation’s finances. Why do we not replace it with a Queen’s Speech update? This could be a proper strategy speech for Parliament every year, delivered by the Prime Minister. There is no reason why a Queen’s Speech update—a strategy speech—could not introduce a Finance Bill. I have listened to enough Chancellors effectively introduce other Departments’ Bills on social care and all sorts of things over the years. There is no reason why a Prime Minister giving an annual update on the Queen’s Speech progress could not set out the key terms of a Finance Bill. The Chancellor could fill in the details later.

I will move on to the spending review, which is also a hugely dysfunctional process—that is assuming it happens, which I will come to in a second. The spending review is essentially a strategy process for the Government, yet it is not led by No. 10 and the Prime Minister; it is led by the Chancellor and a finance Department that potentially micro-manages a wholly separate strategy from that of the Prime Minister of this country. Through this process, the Treasury has other Departments totally over a barrel. I think there would be less of a problem with how spending reviews are approached if the Treasury actually approached them effectively, but it does not. Right now, the UK has budgets set to 2020, which is next year. The country has no budgets in place for any of its spend after next year, which is wholly unacceptable.

Look at how this plays out on the ground. Last week I was up in Bradford to meet the opportunity area team, who are doing some absolutely fantastic work on the ground by connecting improvements in schools, businesses, the local authority and communities. This is a long-term—probably a decade-long—project to get structural change in a community that has bags of potential but needs its schools to do better and its businesses to connect with and develop the talent coming out of those schools. However, the team does not even have a budget after next year. How can we expect to get long-term change in our country, if budgets do not even extend beyond the next 12 months? It is entirely disconnected from the real world of how change happens on the ground. I have talked about opportunity areas, but it is writ large across virtually every single Government-delivered project that is happening on the ground to change things and improve lives.

The Treasury has just cancelled the spending review. From what I read in the papers, we will simply be rolling budgets forwards. At such a crucial time, I cannot think of a less strategic way to manage the UK’s public finances and invest in the future.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): The right hon. Lady is making a compelling point on longer budgets. Does she agree that short-term budgets cause huge uncertainty for the responsibilities of devolved Administrations, who rely on knowing when the Budget will come and what the spending will be?

Justine Greening: Indeed I do. Of course, not being able to plan ahead is a hugely inefficient way to manage resources. We spend efficiently when we can get long-term deals from suppliers and contractors, and when we can plan into the future. The inability of any of us to do this is absolutely an inefficient, sub-optimal way to manage finances. If we were to have the spending review, it would be a three-year spending review, but even a three-year or five-year spending review is not long term for a country. The companies that I spent 15 years working in did three-year to five-year spending reviews, but they were not Britain, which needs to invest for the long term.

How on earth are we going to invest long term in people and unlock social mobility if we will not even look beyond the next two or three years? If we will not even look beyond the next 12 months, it is absolutely impossible. This is a failing strategy, and a functioning department or ministry of finance should know that. The fact that the Treasury does not know that tells us everything about why it is not fit for purpose and should, as it stands today, be abolished.
The way in which that failing extends, operates and works on policy in practice—I speak as a former Secretary of State who ran three spending Departments—is that unless a departmental policy area is demonstrably and critically failing on the ground, the Treasury’s attitude is to turn a blind eye and hope that it all gets better. The Treasury’s technical explanation for this is that it hopes that that will drive efficiencies; that the system will have to work harder and deliver the same for less money. That might be true in some cases, but we are set up to fail because the Treasury has no way of understanding when that point has been long passed, and we do not have enough resources to deliver the Government’s plan—possibly the Prime Minister’s plan, but often it is the Chancellor’s plan.

Problems are not fixed early and are simply left. By the time the Treasury finally understands that it is a crisis, it is more expensive to fix it. Alongside a total lack of long-term planning, the Treasury does not fix problems early, which is hugely expensive. Departments’ spending—be it on prisons, schools, healthcare, local government or children’s and adults’ services—ends up in crisis, needing last-minute funding. That is a hugely expensive way to run the nation’s finances. Most importantly, it leads to real hardship on the ground, which is the exact opposite of what Governments of all colours try to achieve.

In my area of education, it was blindingly clear in early 2017 that, although the schools funding formula was broadly the right approach—levelling up schools that had traditionally been underfunded—more money needed to go through the formula, and the money should have come from the Treasury. That was clear to me from talking to colleagues and MPs in the House, and from talking and listening to teachers and parents, yet it was only after the election that we could take any action on that obvious problem. In fact, as everyone knows, I ended up doing my own mini-budget to release £1.3 billion to put into frontline funding. That was a hugely expensive way to run the nation’s finances. Most importantly, it leads to real hardship on the ground, which is the exact opposite of what Governments of all colours try to achieve.

Reviews are another classic Treasury ruse. The recent Augar review managed to waste well over a year coming up with obvious conclusions about additional funding for further education, but no doubt the Treasury is delighted that it can kick the issue into the long grass for another 12 to 18 months. However, if the substance of the point is that FE needs additional funding, the Treasury has not done young people in the FE system any favours by turning its face away from the need to fund the system properly. It simply cannot be allowed to continue operating in this way.

I have talked about my experience of how the Treasury interacts with other Departments, but what about its policies? It should be managing the nation’s finances to maximise long-term value by unlocking the potential of its most crucial, precious resource—its people. It should set taxation and public investment policy to deliver that strategy for the long term. That is how to reduce the deficit sustainably. It needs to be a finance Department with policies to tackle weak access to opportunity.

For example, how do we recapitalise a generation of young people who do not have access to capital and therefore are not only disconnected from the fact that Britain is a capitalist society but cannot access opportunity? The Government and Parliament decided that they are willing to give young people access to capital if they want one kind of opportunity—a degree—but other opportunities are a wholly different matter. If young people want resources to move across the country to get the apprenticeship opportunity that they really want, to start a business, to put down a deposit on a house, or to rent a place somewhere where they can get on with their career, we do not capitalise them to do that. We should be doing that, and a functioning Treasury would look at those sorts of strategic measures to unlock a structural change in access to opportunity and social mobility in our country.

My hon. Friend the Member for Mid Worcestershire (Nigel Huddleston) asked a good question about the leadership candidates. At the moment, we are hearing only simple, tactical taxation suggestions that, frankly, would not strategically or structurally shift the dial on social mobility.

Nigel Huddleston: My right hon. Friend is being very generous in giving way. Does she agree that enabling young people to reach their full potential is a core responsibility not only of the Treasury but of the Government? I suspect it is one of the key reasons why we got into politics in the first place. Will she join me in appealing to the Prime Minister, before she leaves office, to make a strategic and big move on education and education funding, which would ensure that the future leader, whoever it is, is obliged to deliver incremental, significant increases in funding for education in order to deliver on the key promise that she made when she first entered Downing Street three years ago?

Justine Greening: If the Conservative party is to be taken seriously as the party of opportunity, it is important that it has a clear, articulated and well-funded strategy on developing our nation’s talents, and of course that means investment in schools. One of the problems is that, because the Treasury does not have an approach on valuing human capital, it does not understand how to look at valuing investment in schools alongside investment in physical capital. It does not have any sense of how to invest in human capital, which is perhaps the most powerful form of capital, but it is all over how to value the long-term returns on physical capital infrastructure projects, such as High Speed 2. The reality is that it is the capacity and talent of the people who get on those trains, log on to the broadband, get on the tube—like my constituents—or get into the cars that go on those roads that will determine whether Britain is successful in the future.

A functioning Treasury would understand that that is how to maximise long-term tax receipts and the effectiveness of public investment, because of course improving lives is the best way to take the pressure off public spend, so much of which is invested in lives that have gone wrong. Instead, the Treasury effectively just manages cash flow year to year—I am a chartered accountant with 15 years of experience in business, so I am as qualified as anyone to comment on this. We see reports saying that tax receipts and growth have been a bit better, so the Chancellor has a bit more money in his pocket. That is
cash flow management, not managing the nation’s books for the long term. It is the polar opposite of a long-term strategy.

The fiscal rules should be scrapped and reworked on the basis of debt and deficit, how we deliver and measure long-term value and whether policy measures are creating or destroying it. In Cabinet, I regularly pointed out to the Chancellor the Treasury’s inadequate approach to valuing investment in people. An example of that is that we spend literally hundreds of thousands of pounds on the children and young people who end up in alternative provision and out of mainstream school. About 6% of them come out of alternative provision with a credible, strong or standard score in GCSE maths and English. That is no sort of strategy. A functioning Treasury would insist that it be reworked to deliver not only better lives but a smarter approach to spending. Those are some of the most challenging and vulnerable young people in our country, and they are often dealt with by children’s services. Those are the kids who have had the toughest starts and often face the bleakest futures.

There is an opportunity cost to them in the failure that lies ahead of them in their lives if we do not help them get on track, and to the public finances, too. I have met lots of those young people. I have been up to the Beacon of Light—a fantastic place in Sunderland that helps young people to get on track and works with local businesses to slot them into careers. It turns their lives around and gets them on track. That is transformational, not just for them but for Britain’s long-term public finances. Those young people generate more tax, which contributes to our economy and our society. The spend on welfare, the justice system and health due to continued family breakdown is less.

As Secretary of State for Education, I had those discussions regularly with the Chancellor, the Chief Secretary and the Treasury. A Treasury sensibly managing public finances for the long-term would run towards a business case that would improve those lives, but it was like pulling teeth. If the Treasury continues to see spending on health, education and prisons only as a cost, it will always try to minimise it. Instead, it should see that spending as an investment that generates a return. Changing the way the Treasury works so that it prioritises political pet projects, sets No. 10 and No. 11 at loggerheads with each other, which is dysfunctional for the nation, and, in the end, achieves the exact opposite of what we all want—for our children, young people and communities to have equality of opportunity, access to opportunity on their doorstep and the chance to be the best version of themselves. That unlocks the chance for our country to be the best version of Britain, too.

10.2 am

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the right hon. Member for Putney (Justine Greening) for securing this debate and for setting the scene so well. It is always a pleasure to speak on matters of such importance, and I support and sympathise with her remarks. I am pleased to see that the Democratic Unionist party is the second-largest party represented in the Chamber today, just slightly behind the Conservative party numerically.

I thank the right hon. Lady for her hard work on this issue and for the work she did as a Minister. I completely agree with her assessment of the Augar review, and I enjoyed reading her piece in the Financial Times earlier this month on that very topic—it was helpful for a better understanding of the debate, for which I thank her. Something that jumped off the screen was this: “Its figures show that graduates going on to earn the highest salaries among their peers will see their overall repayments reduced by £18k—a third compared with now. However, for lower to middle-earner graduates, it is the opposite—Augar raises their overall repayments by £12k, almost double.”

I sincerely believe that that reinforces the view that the rich get richer at the expense of the lower class, who become stuck in a mire, as the right hon. Lady mentioned. We should also put on the record our thanks to the Library for providing a briefing pack with information and examples of the issue to help us.

It is important to look at the different opportunities for social mobility for women compared with those for men. There have been changes, which we must recognise, but later I will give an example and tell the story of a constituent who I think exemplifies the issue from a gender point of view. We must also address the fact that ethnic groups have experienced differing life chances over time. In her concluding remarks, the right hon. Lady referred to the need to give everyone the opportunity to maximise their potential, and I want to see that as well. There is also the issue of social mobility opportunities across the country in business and industry.
I am not here to play party politics—that is not my job in this place or what I am about—but it is only fair and right to recognise that Tony Blair’s Labour Government committed themselves to social mobility. At that time—before my time in the House—Blair also committed himself to addressing the issue of poverty, because social mobility and poverty were interlinked. To be fair, it is only right to recognise those commitments. The Conservative-Lib Dem coalition Government also had a clear strategy to improve social mobility. The then Deputy Prime Minister, Nick Clegg, said, “fairness means social mobility.” Clearly, he looked at that too.

The right hon. Lady referred at some length to human capital—it is important to put that on record—which I think is the crux of the matter. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development defines human capital as the “knowledge, skills, competencies and attributes embodied in individuals that facilitate the creation of personal, social and economic well-being”.

Clearly, we should never underestimate human capital if we want it to arrive at where its potential allows. In an October 2018 release, the ONS indicated that the total stock of human capital in the UK in real terms was worth £20.4 trillion in 2017, slightly down from £20.6 trillion the year before. It is good to recognise human capital.

Earlier, I mentioned a young lady in my constituency who I believe would fit into this category. She is an example of someone who, through social mobility, tried to advance her status and position in life, and succeeded. It is important to mention someone who achieved her potential when the regime was perhaps not set up to let her do so.

Mr Gregory Campbell: Does my hon. Friend agree that part of what we need to do is to further incentivise people, particularly young people, through the tax system, so that they can save? Personal allowances, for example, have risen in recent years, but we also need a rise in the national insurance threshold, so that people—particularly young people and those in part-time employment—can earn a higher net income, then work through the system of tax credits cut if she was on a course, which she would therefore be unable to afford. That was her predicament.

I refer to it now and others who speak afterwards will do the same. Such examples perpetuate the idea that university is only for the young and for the middle and upper classes, and that those who are called to do different things with their life cannot do it all. That frustrates me and, for the record, I would like to see the change proposed by the right hon. Lady be achieved. The system as designed does not allow for change, but ties us to where we are. Knowing the young lady as we do, she is a loss to the medical profession. If she wanted to claim housing benefit to offset the loss of tax credits, she would have to go on universal credit, and she simply could not afford the five-week lead-in because she has four children and rent to pay.

My constituent is stuck, and my fear is that the Augar review does not help people like that—the right hon. Member for Putney said in her introduction, I refer to it now and others who speak afterwards will do the same. Such examples perpetuate the idea that university is only for the young and for the middle and upper classes, and that those who are called to do different things with their life cannot do it all. That frustrates me and, for the record, I would like to see the change proposed by the right hon. Lady, because it would be helpful.

My staff have made inquiries about the help available to get my constituent to the stage at which she can go into nursing with the bursary that being a student nurse brings. As for making education accessible to working-class people, however, we clearly have not achieved that. We need to work harder to do that. That is why I am supportive of my colleague, the right hon. Lady, and her desire to ensure that those in need of help and support to reach their goals can get it, regardless of the social structure into which they were born.

This debate is about giving opportunity and about ensuring that those who need help can achieve it. At the present time, our system does not help such people in the way that it should. The days of education only for the privileged are, and should be, a thing of the past, and the days of further education only for the young or privileged also need to be a thing of the past.
[Jim Shannon]

This Government and the Minister must understand where people are coming from and help them to get to where they need to be.

My mum and dad sent me to boarding school. I know, honestly, that that was a big step for them to take. Those five years when I was in boarding school meant that my working-class family had to keep the same car for years, had no holidays, and so on. I am therefore deeply indebted to my parents for giving me that educational opportunity. They worked, scrimped and saved to make it happen. What I want to see in the society I live in and represent is everyone having the same opportunity. I do not see that now, unfortunately. That is why this debate is so important—I thank the right hon. Lady for securing it and for airing the issues so well today. By doing so, she has done a favour and sought justice for people across all of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, where opportunity and equality should be there for all.

10.14 am

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mr Robertson.

To my shock and surprise, I suppose, I agreed with an awful lot of what the right hon. Member for Putney (Justine Greening) said. It is just a shame that her Government have no intention of doing a lot of the things that she spoke about. There is no evidence that they will do any of those things, despite her best efforts. In many cases, indeed, what the Government have done to people across these islands is quite the opposite.

The right hon. Lady spoke about the Treasury running a separate policy to the Prime Minister and about the need for investment in the long-term rather than only year to year. I agree wholeheartedly with such things, which need to see change. Again, however, the Government seem intent on having reviews that go nowhere and on other delaying tactics, and not on investing in that long term. As I suggested in my intervention, that has a knock-on effect on the Scottish Government and their ability to do the things that they want to get on with and do.

Ongoing uncertainty about budgets, the wait or lag times between what the UK Government announce and their Budget, and then what the Scottish Government have to do with that money and the implications of the Barnett formula—whether things go up or down the UK—all determine what is left for the Scottish Government to spend. That adds to the unpredictability of the Scottish budget and the priorities within that, because the priorities of the Scottish Government are not necessarily anywhere near those of the UK Government, who set the budgets and determine how the money will flow. A huge amount therefore needs to change in how things are done in the UK. Unfortunately, however, I do not see things changing anytime soon.

The Social Mobility Commission’s “State of the Nation” reports provide a further damning indictment of the UK Government. The commission has found that social mobility has stagnated over the past four years at virtually all stages from birth to work. That is not a huge surprise to anyone, because poor social mobility has a close relationship with income inequality, an indicator that the UK has consistently failed to improve. The UK is the fifth most unequal county in Europe, according to the Institute for Public Policy Research.

Income inequality as an issue is of course not exclusive to the UK. Global trends point to inherited wealth increasing faster than earned income. Sustained efforts are required to get rid of the sticky floor, which makes it incredibly difficult for people to climb out of poverty. The OECD estimates that it will take five generations for children in poverty in the UK to reach the average income—that is a sobering statistic—and gives no prospect of things changing soon.

I have raised some of the issues surrounding the tax system before in this place. The tax system in the UK is simply not fit to tackle big issues such as income inequality and social mobility. It is unwieldy, unnecessarily complex and full of holes to hide in. This UK Government have provided a catalogue of tax reliefs for those who are already wealthy. A report by the Tax Justice Network illustrates that well. It found that wealthy families substantially reduce inheritance tax obligations by invoking tax reliefs on the value of agricultural and business property. Last year, the combined cost of that particular tax relief was £930 million—equivalent to the cost of employing 23,000 NHS nurses. In fact, £930 million can buy a lot of things—it is nearly the cost of expected savings to Government of the universal credit two-child limit. It is extremely telling that this Government prioritise tax breaks for the very wealthy while simultaneously cutting support for children at the lowest end of the income scale—those who need it the very most.

The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) was absolutely correct to point out the gender gap in social mobility, and the gap for black and minority ethnic communities. That is writ large in the statistics and in the people I see at my surgeries. He was correct that, when done right, tax credits are a great boost to many people and that those wishing to better themselves within the bizarre structure that the UK Government have put together have lost out.

In my own family, my Papa Thewliss studied, went to night school and did the best he could for his family. In essence, that is part of the reason why I am here today—my grandparents were willing to put that investment into their children, so that my parents could be the first in their families to go to university, and so I am here today. On Saturday, my gran turns 99, and it is some satisfaction that she sees what has happened in her family to get me here.

The structure has to be in place for such social mobility to happen, however. University has to be affordable and apprenticeships have to be supported and achievable. That is not always available for too many people. The points that the hon. Member for Strangford made about the accessibility of apprenticeships and other things, and that the right hon. Lady made about people being able to travel to reach those apprenticeships, are important. It is also important that apprentices can earn a real living wage, because the minimum that apprentices are entitled to is a pittance. We cannot expect people to put their lives on hold for the chance of an apprenticeship wage. More support needs to be put into real living costs, because apprentices have bills to pay and families to support, and that needs to be part of the package.
The social contract has been ripped up for the people who need it most. Last month’s report by Philip Alston, the UN special rapporteur, stated that austerity has decimated the lives of many people and actively pushed them into poverty. The UK Government have said that that kind of fiscal discipline is vital to reduce the deficit and build a strong economy, but that need for fiscal discipline evaporates completely when it comes to tax breaks for the wealthy, spending billions of pounds on Brexit preparations or putting nuclear weapons on the Clyde.

It is not difficult to draw the conclusion that the cuts were never about reducing the deficit and are ideologically driven. We are seeing even more blatant rhetoric coming from the Tory leadership race, in which the right hon. Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson) has promised a huge cut in income tax for the highest earners if he is elected. The Fraser of Allander Institute at the University of Strathclyde in my constituency has hinted at the impact that that will have on the Scottish budget. Because of the devolution of income tax, the tax cut would not apply in Scotland, but the resulting budget cuts would. To pay for it, national insurance would increase, which will have an impact because it is reserved—Scotland has no control over national insurance. We would lose out on the budget because of that policy; and national insurance contributions for people in Scotland would increase.

If I had the opportunity to give an extra £6,000 a year to one group of people, it would not be those earning over £80,000 a year. It would be some of the families rendered destitute by the hostile environment policy, for whom my office has to source school uniforms, food bank vouchers and Christmas presents, year in year out in some cases; or the women who are victims of domestic abuse, who have to declare that their third child was born as a result of rape just to put food on the table; or people with disabilities, who have to be hauled through a degrading and inhumane assessment system at the risk of being threatened with sanctions. Those are the people in society who desperately who need a break and to receive that £6,000. That is a choice that leadership candidates are putting forward as something they would bring in to Government if selected.

My colleagues on the SNP Benches and I have consistently called for devolution of all welfare powers, inheritance tax and other taxes, so that the Scottish Government can get on with the job of tackling income inequality. We have created the first Scottish income tax system, which is the fairest in the UK. The system has meant that 55% of Scots pay less tax, while raising £68 million for public services. The report I referred to by the Social Mobility Commission, which was so damning of the UK Government, congratulated the Scottish Government on the work they have been doing to increase social mobility. The report says that Scotland is going against the UK trend and becoming more socially mobile.

I urge the right hon. Member for Putney to look at what Scotland is doing in that regard. A person’s socio-economic status is now less likely to be determined by their parents’ socio-economic status. The likelihood of being in a professional job for those from a working-class background compared with those from a professional background has narrowed over the past four years, from 28 percentage points in 2014 to 23 percentage points. The Scottish Government have tried to tackle the issue of people from different socio-economic backgrounds getting into university. A huge amount of work has been done to switch that trend.

It is not difficult to give credit to businesses, as the right hon. Lady did, that are involved in that kind of initiative. I visited Zurich in my constituency, which is taking more people straight from school into the insurance sector. It recognises that having a degree is not necessarily what it needs in its business—it wants a rounded range of skills for a better business. It has found it hugely beneficial to bring people in from school.

Justine Greening: I am sure the hon. Lady will be pleased to hear that Standard Life Aberdeen is also very much walking the walk, and genuinely making an impact that goes well beyond its employees and into the wider community.

Alison Thewliss: I agree that there are great examples of businesses right across Scotland—I could stand here all day talking about them. It is good that Standard Life Aberdeen is doing that and that more businesses recognise that including a degree on job adverts and applications is not necessary in many cases. By removing that and looking much more widely at the range of skills that people can offer, rather than what degree they do or do not have, social mobility will increase, so that is to be commended.

The Scottish Government are pursuing an inclusive growth agenda and view tackling inequality and growing the economy as two sides of the same coin. I am sure that the right hon. Lady would agree with that, given her speech. It is important to think about the type of society that we are creating with economic policies, and to consider what the point of growth is, if it is built on the backs of the most vulnerable. The Scottish Government have invested in decreasing child poverty, with an ambitious target to reduce it to 10% by 2030.

The right hon. Lady laid out the dysfunction of the British state in great detail. That is what we see from Scotland. Increasingly, people in Scotland do not believe that the British state will work for them. We have tried, we have waited and we have looked for changes, but they have not come. In fact, from the Scottish perspective we can only see things getting worse. We have asked for more powers, so that Scotland can try to tackle these things, but we do not yet have the full levers of powers that we would have as an independent nation in which we could tackle inequality head-on, using the full range of powers of an independent country. Time and again, the UK Government have abdicated their responsibility to the most vulnerable people. If they cannot do their job, they should allow Scotland the powers to do it instead.

10.26 am

Lyn Brown (West Ham) (Lab): It is an absolute privilege to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Robertson. This has been a good debate; it is nice to watch friendly fire and I enjoyed listening to the right hon. Member for Putney (Justine Greening) make an excoriating attack on the Treasury. I will come to her comments about
social mobility later, but the fundamental truth is that when she talks about the current Tory Treasury, she is absolutely right. This Government do not treat spending on social infrastructure as the investment in our future that it should be. Unsurprisingly, as she says, this Government have failed to invest in our children, our young people and in all of us.

During the last year of the Labour Government, we spent almost 6% of our GDP on publicly funded education and training. By last year, that had fallen to just over 4%—a cut of more than a quarter. Given the challenges we face, we clearly need far more investment in skills and knowledge, to transform our economy, to deal with the climate crisis and to make the fourth industrial revolution prosperous and fair. Instead, as we know, during Tory rule school funding per pupil has fallen by 8% in real terms.

The consequences are blindingly obvious. More than 1,000 schools have had to rely on crowdfunding for basics such as pencils and textbooks. At least 26 schools are closing their classrooms early because they do not have the money to keep teaching. The proportion of pupils in supersized classes with more than 31 pupils to a single teacher is at its highest level for 36 years. The number of pupils doing a GCSE in music has fallen by almost a quarter since 2010, just as industry is asking us for more creativity and collaboration in education, because those are the skills needed. Can the Minister honestly say his Government have put in the investment that our schools need?

Our further education providers have been cut by even more: sixth forms by 21% and colleges by 8%. The Social Mobility Commission found that 41% of FE providers had reduced their careers guidance and 48% their mental health support. In its report, it also cited evidence that 51% of colleges had stopped teaching modern languages courses. What about the notion of a global Britain post Brexit? Some 38% of schools and colleges have dropped courses in science, technology, engineering and maths—the courses our economy needs to prepare for the fourth industrial revolution. It is jaw-dropping that schools and colleges have been forced to do this.

We have a recruitment crisis in nursing thanks to the Government’s scrapping of bursaries. We have a productivity crisis linked to a skills deficit and a lack of progression during people’s careers. Surely, the Government must have invested in adult education, given that we know people have to change course in their careers—nobody goes into a job at 18 and stays till they are 67 any longer—but no: that has been cut almost in half since 2009-10. Apprenticeship spending has fallen by 44%. The Open University, which has given a second chance to millions of people, is on its knees because of the Government’s tuition fees regime. It could not be clearer that older and part-time learners are simply scared off by the level of debt they are now expected to take on if they want to improve their education and change their course in life.

That is the situation in schools, colleges and adult education—cuts, not investment. What about early years? Sure Start has been cut by two thirds since 2010, with 1,000 centres closed. We know about the amazing benefits of Sure Start—we heard about them again this month—so it is not that the Government do not know about Sure Start’s value to society and the economy. Children are almost 20% less likely to be hospitalised by the age of 11 if their family has access to a Sure Start centre—that is massive—and the most disadvantaged children benefit the most. The impact on the NHS of fewer children being hospitalised is enough by itself to pay for 6% of Sure Start’s costs, and it is one impact among many.

The 2010 evaluation of Sure Start found that access to Sure Start increased children’s physical health, including their chance of being a healthy weight. We all know that childhood obesity, apart from causing misery, costs the state money. The 2012 evaluation found improvements in parenting and the home learning environment. The 2015 evaluation found improvements in children’s behaviour and more. All those evaluations were funded by the Government, but this Government have not learned that investing in Sure Start saves money. It pays off. Even looking at it from this Government’s ideological position, it saves money. It does not just improve lives.

The story is the same with youth centres, which have been cut by 40% on average across the country and by as much as 91% in some places. I understand that Tory Treasury Ministers might not understand that making a bat and ball and a table tennis table available to young people creates wealth; it is hard enough to get them to understand that that is what happens when they open a Sure Start centre or invest in teachers in our schools. When investment in youth services is taken away, young people are far more likely to have their lives blighted and their potential wasted by becoming victims of exploitation.

In east London, we know that only too well. Youth centres and youth workers provide young people with spaces away from the county lines groomers on our streets. Youth centres are places where young people know they can find an adult to talk to—somebody who can listen to their problems, offer them real resilience against the troubles on our streets and point them towards opportunity. What is so essential is not the bat and ball and the table tennis table in the youth club, but the professional who stands by the young person’s side and can give them different ways of dealing with the man on the street who offers them chicken to be a lookout for him while he sells his drugs.

Good youth work stops children being groomed, stops children’s potential being wasted and stops children’s future contributions to our economy and our society being stifled. Ultimately, it stops the young people I have been speaking about ending up in prison, which I am sure the Minister knows is massively expensive—more than £3,000 per prisoner per month. If we had invested earlier, how many of the lives that have been blighted by county lines exploitation could have been saved, and how much money would the Treasury have saved? How much more would have been contributed to our economy? Investment in social infrastructure benefits our economy and our society in so many ways for decades into the future. This pro-austerity Tory Treasury just does not get it. It is a barrier to the investment our communities need. The right hon. Member for Putney knows that from her first-hand experience as Education Secretary.

The situation is no different on other issues, such as the climate change crisis: the Chancellor is still trying to obstruct the green investment we need. Thankfully, the right hon. Member for Runnymede and Weybridge (Mr Hammond) will not be at the Treasury much
longer. Unfortunately, the reckless, regressive and plain idiotic pledges of the Tory leadership contenders do not inspire confidence that anything will change. It is a greater mistake to be right than Lady did not throw her hat in the ring. I have watched what she has been doing over the past few months—I have even watched her videos online—and I thought she might be building up to a bid, but sadly not.

Instead, we have the right hon. Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson), who has promised £10 billion of tax cuts. That money would pay for more than 400,000 new teachers, but of course it is not teachers or nurses who would benefit from those tax cuts. More than 80% of the financial gains would go to the highest earning 10% of families. It is clear where his priorities lie, and it ain’t in investing in our children.

A Labour Treasury would be totally different. At the last election, we committed to providing over £6 billion more for schools and over £5 billion more for free childcare, as well as nearly £14 billion for post-school education, including free further education and higher education tuition. But this is not just about individual pledges; it is about how we will work across Government to ensure that our investments build social justice as we rebuild Britain.

We will support cumulative impact assessments of our Budgets to ensure that they help the many and not the few, and we will adopt the Select Committee on Education’s recommendations for reform of the Social Mobility Commission. The right hon. Member for Putney will know that that Committee is chaired by one of her hon. Friends. I have not seen him of late; I wonder whether he, too, is suffering from friendly fire. I share that Committee’s diagnosis of the problem. We have had many years of initiatives to improve social mobility that simply have not succeeded. I think the right hon. Lady agrees that sometimes, in the case of opportunity areas, those initiatives have been just a bit too small. At other times, they have had to fight against the headwind of austerity Budgets that have increased poverty and inequality while cutting the public services that protect us from them. Even when Budgets have been progressive and investment significant, focusing on social mobility has not made our country just, because the aim has been to help only a few to get on, and not to make our country fairer for all.

The right hon. Lady disagrees with that as a definition of social mobility, but from what she has said in the past about how we have never actually had social mobility in this country, I do not think she disagrees with that as a description of reality. I agree we should not get too caught up in semantics, but talking about social justice does not do that. Instead, it expands the debate back out to where we both agree it should be.

When I introduce myself I do not know what title to use. I say, “I’m the shadow Minister for social mobility, kind of against social injustice. I’m anti-poverty and for social justice.” I do it all the time because we do not have a term that adequately explains where we think we should be going. I do not want to argue about words with the right hon. Lady. I think we should focus not just on narrow, voluntary programmes that are based in the Department for Education, but on joined-up strategies to transform our country and make it fairer and more just for all. That should be backed by the investment that only the Treasury can provide.

Labour would appoint a social justice Minister, despite the problems that the definition of that term might cause, and we will ensure that that Minister co-ordinates action across Government, drives forward our social justice agenda, and ensures it is matched by needed investment. The Treasury must properly support all the actions that should be taken by Departments—not just the Department for Education or the Department for Work and Pensions, but the Department of Health and Social Care, the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, and even the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport—so as to tackle the injustice and poverty that this Government have effectively created through their austerity measures. That new Minister will have the full support of the Treasury because they will be based there. There will be no separation between the wider Labour agenda and Treasury strategy, such as that described by the right hon. Lady. We are talking about serious investment and long-term commitment to social justice, and that is what Labour will offer.
but active empowerment and support for people from every background in this country. Supporting social mobility is not only right but it is in the public interest, as it means that our culture, national conversation, politics and economics will benefit from the widest possible range and diversity of voices. It is also wise in a more directly economic sense because, as the global economy’s centre of gravity moves eastwards in the 21st century, the UK’s strength will lie in not merely the size but above all the quality of its workforce. Social capital and investment in human capital is vital to those things. It is therefore in our national interest to encourage and nurture people to achieve their best, because we need their talents and skills.

The Government’s record is a good one. They have achieved higher employment in every region of the UK, and introduced and increased the national living wage. They have taken millions of the lowest paid out of income tax altogether. That can, of course, only be a staging post, and the Social Mobility Commission’s report, published at the end of April, demonstrates that there is plenty of work still to be done. Importantly, however, we understand the magnitude of the task.

For many people, the yardstick for social mobility is home ownership, and as a result of Government policy, 80% of first-time buyers pay no stamp duty at all—that is one reason why the number of first-time buyers is reaching its highest level for 11 years. The Government have also made a real impact in education, which was in part due to my right hon. Friend’s time in government. A combination of the free schools programme and a reformed curriculum has narrowed the attainment gap between disadvantaged pupils and others at every stage, from early years to secondary school. Ninety-five per cent. of all early years settings are now rated good or outstanding. That is up from 68% in 2010 and means that a record proportion of children start year 1 with a good level of development.

The Government have backed schools with £1.3 billion of extra investment and protected the pupil premium, with 1.9 million more children in good and outstanding schools. However, that funding will not get to the heart of improving social mobility unless we also tackle geographical inequalities. That is why, as my right hon. Friend rightly highlighted, it is important to make school funding fairer and more consistent.

The Department for Education provides roughly £25 million every year through the national funding formula to assist the smallest and most remote schools, and in the last Budget it was announced that rural primary schools would benefit from a £200 million programme for fast and reliable internet access across the country. The apprenticeship funding model is designed to support individuals from disadvantaged areas, by providing cash payments to providers for training apprentices who live in the top 27% of deprived areas. The Government have awarded the first 11 Institutes of Technology across England, so that even more students can access an excellent technical education.

My county of Herefordshire is something of a social mobility cold spot, and I am particularly grateful to my right hon. Friend as she was Secretary of State when the Department for Education approved the New Model in Technology and Engineering in my constituency. That was the first new university in this country for 40 years, and it is a specialist tech and engineering institution that focuses specifically on a 50:50 gender balance, open access, and the kind of empowerment that is characteristic of social mobility around the country. It will make a huge difference not only in Herefordshire, where social mobility is much lower than it should be, but elsewhere around our nation.

The Government have invested in 12 coastal, urban and rural opportunity areas, where young people face entrenched challenges, to bring together local and national partners to work with local communities and bring about lasting change. Education must ultimately equip young people to make a successful transition into employment and life as a whole. Employment is obviously important, and people should have choices as they reach adulthood. That is why technical education is so important. The transformation is now under way through T-levels, which will mean that young people have the knowledge to get the highly-skilled, well-paid jobs of the future, and through continuing work on the apprenticeship programme, which will try to create more diverse opportunities: over 1.7 million people have started apprenticeships since 2015. As my right hon. Friend will be aware, in higher education we have record rates of disadvantaged 18-year-olds getting into university. There has been an increase in the take-up of degree apprenticeships, and we have been specifically encouraging bids to improve access to degree apprenticeships for disadvantaged and under-represented groups.

Skills remain of vital importance later in life, particularly in a 21st century in which people will be regularly re-skilling and re-educating themselves. The Government fully fund all adults to take English and maths to level 2, and from 2020 they will be funding basic digital skills. They are also establishing a national retraining scheme to support those in work, including the self-employed, to develop the skills that they will need to thrive in the new economy. To that end, the Government have pledged £100 million in funding to get the scheme up and running.

Let me pick up some of the questions raised by Members in the debate. The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) rightly stressed the importance of sexual equality across social mobility and highlighted the complexity of the benefits system as a potential impediment to change. He is absolutely right about both those points. He may have misread the proposals in the Augar report, he will see that they are all deeply committed to improving social mobility, not just through this report but in their wider lives and work.

The hon. Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss) gave a more combative speech. I remind her that the Treasury is the product of cross-party evolution; whatever its weaknesses, they are the product of historical processes. It may require radical change—I will come to that question later—but the suggestion that it is not an institution with its own ethos that has developed over many years and generations is one that any Treasury Minister would contest. If the Scottish Government are unhappy with the fiscal arrangements that they have with the UK as a whole, it is up to them to raise taxes themselves, using the new tax powers they have, and to spend that money as they see fit.
Government have made huge progress on education, in reduced for the eighth successive year. The Scottish least deprived areas achieving a pass at higher level has passes at a higher level, which is up from 22.2% in show his working. For the first time, more than 30% of he says; I ask him to correct the record, or at least to policy. There is some evidence for that.

Scottish Government had been regularly criticised for having a regressive higher education said. I said that the Scottish Government had been in my constituency.

table tennis table, provided through public funding, she mentioned table tennis tables; I was playing at a free tremendous record in this area in many ways. I am glad free childcare available for working parents of three and amount. They have doubled the amount of seem to have forgotten that the Government will have the Government have invested significantly in it. She regards inequality in different ways, including in education. I remind her that Scottish higher education policy has been regularly criticised for being regressive, that Scottish schools performed worse than ever in the Programme for International Student Assessment scores for 2016 and that it may be worth her while looking at the Scottish Government’s own record before raising these issues more widely.

Alison Thewliss: The Minister is quite wrong in what he says; I ask him to correct the record, or at least to show his working. For the first time, more than 30% of pupils left school last year with a minimum of five Higher passes at a higher level, which is up from 22.2% in 2009 and 2010. The gap between those in the most and least deprived areas achieving a pass at higher level has reduced for the eighth successive year. The Scottish Government have made huge progress on education, in vast contrast to what is happening in England.

Jesse Norman: The hon. Lady misunderstood what I said. I said that the Scottish Government had been regularly criticised for having a regressive higher education policy. There is some evidence for that.

Alison Thewliss: That is not true.

Jesse Norman: It certainly has been; if the hon. Lady looks at the record, she can see that. I also pointed out that Scottish schools had performed worse than ever before in the PISA rankings in 2016. She can check that; it is an objective fact, not a matter for debate. She is entitled to her views, but not to the facts.

The Opposition spokesperson, the hon. Member for East Ham—I apologise, I mean the hon. Member for West Ham (Lyn Brown); I am sure many footballers will not thank me for that. The hon. Lady mentioned table tennis tables; having been a director of the Roundhouse in London for many years, I know the value of local social involvement and engagement. I agree with it, and in London for many years, I know the value of local social involvement and engagement. I agree with it, and in my constituency.

Lyn Brown: Will the Minister give way?

Jesse Norman: I am sorry; I have no time. If the hon. Lady had spoken for less time, I would have had more time to respond.

I will respond to the question raised by my right hon. Friend the Member for Putney. It is a very interesting attack, not just on the Treasury but on the model of Government that we have in this country. It deserves to be taken with the utmost seriousness. The point has often been made before, although not quite in the same terms. Historically, there is a tension in British Government between the Treasury as a finance ministry and the Treasury as an economics ministry; that is well understood.

My right hon. Friend’s concerns about short-termism in public policy making are also criticisms that have often been made. The extent to which this Government, their immediate predecessor and the one before that, have taken steps to attempt to ameliorate and address some of these issues is interesting. For example, we now have multi-year funding strategies for road and rail infrastructure, which we did not have before; there is a separate independent economics ministry, the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, which is specifically designed to provide an economic counterpart to the Treasury; and, other steps have been taken to try to combat embedded institutional concerns about short-termism in public funding. Undoubtedly, there is more to do. The criticisms have weight, as has been shown by the responses that the Government have made; it is a point that the Government have well taken and are making significant progress.

There is an embedded tension between the desire for longevity in funding and the desire for democracy. If we lived in China, we would operate according to a 100-year economic plan; we cannot do that because this country has always been bound by the principle that no Government can bind their successors. It is right that we should try to build more longevity into public policy; I have touched on some of the ways in which that can be done, but I have no doubt there are many areas in which it can be done better. This embedded tension between cash constraints, managing the public exchequer, the democratic accountability of Ministers and long-term funding is one that will not be removed by abolishing the Treasury.

My right hon. Friend said that no company would ever see a contradiction between the chief executive and the financial director; I think she is mistaken. There are many companies in which the chief executive would like to spend money and the finance director, in league with the chair, prevents him from doing so. There have been many points in British government when that has been true. It is often true in a Labour Government, when the wisdom of having an independent Treasury, with a degree of control over public finances, stops a Labour Government from thoroughly spendthrift public spending policies. I close by saying that I encourage my right hon. Friend to be careful what she wishes for.

10.58 am

Justine Greening: It has been interesting to hear people respond to the stark points that I deliberately made. There is more consensus on how we ought to approach investment than some of the politics suggest.

There is a tension between the fact that we really ought to be investing over the lifecycle, but in the end the electoral cycle drags our view to a more short-term basis. If Government and democracy are there to deliver for people, then we have to start addressing these issues. That does not mean removing the choice of politicians; it means helping the public understand when short-term politicians are taking decisions that have long-term costs, which the public may not want to bear.

I represent the constituency with the youngest demographic in the country, alongside Battersea. The average age of a voter in Putney is 37 to 38. Many people in my community think change is too slow. They want to see a more sophisticated strategy than, dare I say, the one that the Opposition set out. If throwing money
could buy us out of the problem of weak social mobility, then the previous Labour Government would have fixed it. Clearly, it is more complex than that. We need an improved framework for investment, fiscal rules that unlock social mobility and an approach to Government finance that supports smart, long-term strategies. I am talking about a political philosophy that is ultimately driven by a belief in people and their potential, but that has to translate into practical change on the ground.

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 10(6)).
Unfortunately, the case of Hoover pensions is not an isolated one, and we have become used to hearing in recent months and years of cruel injustices suffered by former employees of British Coal, British Steel and BHS. The evidence also suggests that we are likely to see many more such cases in the future. Before I go into more detail, and pose questions for the Minister, I shall provide some background on the history of Hoover in Merthyr Tydfil and explain the financial background that has led to the unacceptable injustices that its former employees now face.

Hoover has been an important employer in Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney for 71 years, since the Pentrebach factory was established in 1948 to make the well-known Hoover washing machine. Only about 300 people were employed at the factory when it opened, but over the following 20 years, because of product demand, the figure rose by the thousands. By the time of Hoover’s 25th anniversary in Merthyr in 1973, more than 5,000 people were employed at the site, all contributing to the company’s pension scheme. Counting the company’s Glasgow plant, Hoover’s British workforce once peaked at 16,500 people. At its peak, the Hoover factory was the largest employer in the Vale of Glamorgan, providing much-needed employment opportunities for generations of local people formerly employed in the iron and coal industries for which Merthyr Tydfil is famous.

That proved to be the high point for the factory: in the 1990s, amid financial difficulties, Hoover was sold to the Italian manufacturer Candy, which over the next few years would decline to invest further in the company or its operations. Job cuts continued over the next 10 years and in 2009, 61 years after the factory opened, production stopped altogether. Since 2009, only 100 staff have remained employed at the Pentrebach factory, in the company’s warehousing, distribution and sales operations. However, in May 2019 Hoover took the decision to move 45 jobs from Pentrebach to its headquarters in Warrington, in a move to centralise its operations, leaving only 60 posts, primarily in distribution, at the Merthyr Tydfil site.

I want to give some background on how the company’s pension scheme arrived at the state it is in today. According to the Pensions Commission set up by the Labour Government in 2004, from 1974 until 2000 the average annual real return on UK equities was as high as 13%, with investments in pension schemes during that time allowing them to flourish and pension contribution rates to increase. However, by the early 1980s the Thatcher Government had become concerned that UK companies were using large contributions to their pension schemes to lower their liability for corporation tax during years of high profits. During that time of prosperous UK pension schemes, what the Conservative Government saw as surplus funds to be taxed in a period of high equity returns were, rather, risk barriers against years of low financial profit and the rising longevity of workforces, as well as a reserve for future workers’ pensions.

The Finance Act 1986, passed by the Tory Government, required companies’ pension funds to declare any surplus of 5% or more, and either remove it within five years or lose part of their tax-exempt status. Many companies made much lower pension contributions in the years after the 1986 Act came into law, but market returns during that time remained so positive that many companies still had large surpluses left in their pension funds. Various UK companies took pension contribution holidays or looked to make improvements to their pension schemes to eliminate the surplus. It was no different in the case of Hoover, which in 1986 looked to wind up the existing pension scheme and replace it with a new scheme with improved benefits for members.

At that time Hoover had 5,500 employees in the UK, half of whom were based in Merthyr Tydfil, and the company’s UK pension scheme had a surplus of approximately £123 million, as I have mentioned. It proposed to take £87 million from the surplus, of which £42 million would go towards improved pensions and £27 million to the company’s general fund, with £18 million to be taken by the Conservative Government under the Finance Act 1986. In 1993, Hoover moved £16.8 million from the surplus to its general fund. It denied that it was being used to cover the £20 million in losses that it suffered from its infamous “free flight” sales promotion—when it promised two free airline tickets to customers who purchased more than £100 worth of products—but said it was for the general financial stability of the company. Hoover accordingly paid £11.2 million in tax to the Government, again under the terms of the Finance Act 1986.

During the 1980s and 1990s, therefore, Hoover paid the Conservative Government a total of £29.2 million. As I have explained, the terms of the Finance Act 1986 were established based on the average annual return on UK equities being 13%, as it was between 1974 and 2000. The Pensions Commission reported a considerably lower long-term average of just over 5%. The Government were incredibly over-optimistic if they assumed that 13% returns could continue into the long term. That is another classic example of the short-sightedness of a Government who placed the employer first, ignoring the employee, thinking only of short-term gain and completely neglecting the long-term potential impact of a policy on hard-working people.

I want to highlight the case of one of my constituents who has had to bear the brunt of this mess: Mr Phillip Little. Mr Little worked at Hoover in Merthyr Tydfil for 35 years, working at several departments and in various jobs across the company over a long and dedicated career. When he took his pension at age 55, he faced an immediate loss of 47%, resulting from payment holidays and Government and company withdrawals from the scheme in previous years, following the Italian company Candy’s takeover of Hoover in the 1990s and its refusal to invest or contribute further to the company’s pension scheme. Now, with the Hoover pension scheme being transferred to the Pension Protection Fund, Mr Little has had to suffer a further 10% reduction in the value of his pension due to the rules and caps, meaning he has taken a hit of 57% in total, losing over half the total value of his pension.

I think we would all agree that nobody should have to make do with less than half the pension they rightfully earned from their decades of hard work. Having been looking forward to retirement after 35 years with the company, Mr Little is devastated, and feels as though, in his words, he has been “mugged” three times over by company withdrawals from the pension scheme, payments to the Government and latterly the scheme’s transfer to the PPF.

Mr Little is one of many hundreds of former long-standing Hoover employees in the Welsh valleys who have been told that the retirement money that they
worked for decades to build up has had to take yet another cut and that there is nothing they can do about it. They have had to sit and watch as the company and Government take money from what was once a surplus fund and is now in hundreds of millions of pounds of debt, and their well-earned retirement has been taken away from them.

I ask the Minister how his Government can justify this legacy of the short-sighted and irresponsible actions of the 1980s Thatcher Government, which imposed the 1986 Act on hundreds of UK companies’ pension funds such as Hoover’s, thinking only of short-term gain. Will the Government now do what is right by the many hundreds of people, such as Phillip Little, who have seen their pensions hit over and over, and repay them with the money they took from the fund under that Finance Act, so that these hard-working people can have the retirement that they deserve and that they worked for decades to build?

In Labour’s 2017 manifesto, we committed to carrying out an immediate review of current pension surplus tax and sharing arrangements, since many of the people at companies across the UK affected by this, such as Hoover, British Coal and British Steel, do not have another private fund to fall back on. The Government must now follow suit. Will the Minister commit to at least reviewing these arrangements, and to giving justice to the many former Hoover employees in my constituency who have been robbed of the pensions they worked to build and on which, having left the workplace, they now depend?

11.12 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Guy Opperman): I congratulate the hon. Member for Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney (Gerald Jones) on his speech, and the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) on his intervention in this debate. It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Robertson.

I accept entirely that this is a sensitive and important matter that the House should debate in the context of the long-term viability of defined-benefit schemes—a matter of concern to the House and to our individual constituents up and down the country. In this particular case, we are concerned with the constituents of the hon. Member for Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney and the members of the Hoover pension scheme, who feel very strongly about this issue. I hope that I will be able to reassure hon. Members that the Pensions Regulator has done everything in its power to achieve the best possible outcome within the current legislative framework.

I will start with defined benefit generally, and make the simple point that the majority of defined-benefit pension schemes in this country are run effectively. We are fortunate to have a robust and flexible system of pension protection in the United Kingdom. The Pensions Regulator, which is based out of Brighton and is obviously independent of Government—although I meet with it on a regular basis—has a range of powers to protect pension schemes and works closely with all involved.

For schemes where the employer goes insolvent, the Pension Protection Fund is there to help to protect the members. Anybody already in receipt of their pension will continue to be paid and other members will receive at least Pension Protection Fund compensation levels. However, we are in the process of reviewing the defined-benefit system; the hon. Gentleman will be aware of the defined benefit White Paper issued a little while ago and the proposals put forward for a future private pensions Act, which we hope to bring forward in this House in due course.

In respect of the Pension Protection Fund itself, I want to ensure that hon. Members fully grasp that the Pensions Regulator has done everything in its power as an independent regulator to achieve the best possible outcome for scheme members. The employer, the Pensions Regulator and the Pension Protection Fund have considered different solutions to address the scheme’s funding deficit. On 31 March 2016, that deficit was approximately £500 million. Given that that funding deficit was putting the solvency of the company and its pension scheme members at risk, the Pensions Regulator intervened.

Turning to the Pensions Regulator’s intervention, on 30 May 2017 it approved a proposal by the 1987 Hoover pension scheme. The approved plan, known as a regulated apportionment arrangement, helped to secure the future for UK employees and gave protection to the pension scheme. The Pensions Regulator agreed to the regulated apportionment arrangement only after ensuring that Hoover had met its very strict criteria. The agreed arrangement between the company and the Pensions Regulator secured a £60 million payment from Hoover into the Pension Protection Fund in May 2019. That lump sum is significantly higher than what it would have received had Hoover fallen into insolvency. In addition, as part of that arrangement the pension scheme would also receive shares representing a 33% stake in Hoover.

That balanced approach addressed the need to protect scheme members’ pensions while preserving jobs in the sector and in the hon. Gentleman’s constituency—a matter that I know he is passionate about. The trustees of the scheme acknowledged that it secured a significantly better outcome for the pension scheme than it would have received through the normal insolvency process, and the best achievable solution for the pension scheme given the circumstances.

Matters proceeded, and I will address the protection for pension scheme members. The Hoover pension scheme left the Pension Protection Fund assessment period and transferred into the Pension Protection Fund itself in May 2019. The hon. Gentleman will be aware that the Pension Protection Fund is effectively an independent lifeboat. It is a fund established to provide a meaningful level of compensation to members of private sector occupational defined-benefit pension schemes who have lost their pension as a result of employer insolvency or impending insolvency.

Crucially, the Pension Protection Fund is funded by a levy on all other defined-benefit schemes. The framework under which the Pension Protection Fund operates means that favouring any one group will place a corresponding burden and risks on other levy payers and Pension Protection Fund members. I accept that the hon. Gentleman sought to persuade me that we should make radical change to the Pension Protection Fund as a whole, but I need to agree something: the previous Labour Government, who were in charge between 1997 and 2010, had opportunities to correct many things, and one of the corrections they made was the creation of the Pension Protection Fund.
We must have a very robust discussion that makes it clear that, were the Pension Protection Fund not in existence, the situation for any scheme member facing this situation would be considerably worse. The Pension Protection Fund, set up in 2005, has transformed the landscape for many people who would otherwise have been left desperately vulnerable and considerably impoverished. It pays a guaranteed level of compensation that was not previously available to pension scheme members in similar circumstances.

Pension Protection Fund compensation guarantees 100% protection to members who are over their scheme’s normal pension age at the date of the employer’s insolvency or to members under normal pension age who retired on ill-health grounds. All other scheme members are paid compensation based on 90% of their pension, subject to a cap.

The Pension Protection Fund is largely seen as a success across all Governments, with respect, and has received strong cross-party support. While the hon. Gentleman is clearly right to champion his constituents’ cause, it is right that the House should celebrate the fact that, without the Pension Protection Fund, things would be considerably worse. Setting it up was a success of the last Labour Government, and it has been endorsed and supported by all other Governments since.

Gerald Jones: I appreciate the Minister’s point about the Pension Protection Fund and how different the situation would have been had it not intervened. However, the central point I was trying to get across was whether there is any opportunity to review the position of surpluses taken under that Finance Act by a previous Conservative Government, maybe not to fully reinstate what the pensioners have lost but to go some way towards defraying some of the difficulties that pensioners now face, in my constituency and beyond.

Guy Opperman: I will answer that with three points. The first is slightly political but has to be made, given the way that the hon. Gentleman put his case. There was an opportunity between 1997 and 2010 to make such a reform if that Labour Government wished to.

However, perhaps it would be appropriate to explain why we got into this situation. Clearly, this is a tax issue. The hon. Gentleman will understand that I am answering on behalf of the Department for Work and Pensions, but I will endeavour to do my best impersonation of Her Majesty’s Treasury and address this. The Treasury’s view is that the Finance Act 1986 addressed what were then considered to be excessive pension scheme surpluses, as there was an absence of clear rules on how surpluses were dealt with. Pension schemes with funding in excess of a certain amount could reduce certain surpluses in a number of ways, including by suspending employer or employee contributions, making taxable payments back to the employer, improving member benefits or providing new benefits to members.

It was entirely a matter for the trustees and employers to decide which method of reducing the surplus to use. If, and only if, they chose to make a refund, the employer was liable to tax at 40% of the amount refunded, so as broadly to recover the tax relief previously given. Those laws on pension scheme surpluses were repealed in 2006, with the introduction of a new pensions tax regime. As to whether the Government can commit to reviewing the terms of the Act and possibly returning the money to the schemes, Her Majesty’s Treasury is clear that it is right and fair that everyone, whether individuals or businesses, must pay the tax that is due.

Before 1986, some employers could use surpluses as a way to avoid tax. They could pay contributions into the pension scheme and receive tax relief, then apply for a return of a surplus. There were no provisions for tax repayments on the return of a surplus. The 40% tax on a return of surplus was introduced in 1986 so as to broadly recover the tax relief previously given. It was not mandatory to return the surplus; a company could instead have a contribution holiday or improve member benefits.

To answer the hon. Gentleman’s point, it is not Her Majesty’s Treasury’s present intention to reform or reinstate anything relating to the situation under the Finance Act 1986, as he sought to persuade me to do. However, I will briefly explain the changes to improve scheme funding. The Pensions Regulator can track pension scheme funding and will react appropriately when there is a large funding deficit. The scheme funding measures proposed in our White Paper will ensure that trustees put in place a more robust plan to ensure that the statutory funding objective is achieved. We intend to use new and existing powers to be clearer in legislation about what is an appropriate length for the recovery plan when there is a funding deficit.

We will take steps to require trustees to explain to the Pensions Regulator their funding and investment strategy, how they intend to mitigate risks to the scheme funding position and how they are complying with funding standards in legislation. The changes are intended to support trustees in their decision making and to strengthen the Pension Regulator’s enforcement regime, to protect members, sponsors and the Pension Protection Fund from future shocks or events such as these. The system will retain some flexibility to ensure that sponsoring employers can balance their obligations to the pension schemes with business needs. The reality is that the Pension Protection Fund is a significant organisation with more than £30 billion of assets and responsibility for more than 236,000 pension scheme members, more than half of whom are current pensioners. It is able to cope with these schemes.

However, the hon. Gentleman and the hon. Member for Strangford, who has now left the Chamber, made points in respect of other cases, including British Coal, British Steel, BHS and others. I will return to those points in respect of other cases, including British Coal, British Steel, BHS and others. I will return to those before I finish, because while the constituents of the hon. Member for Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney would like to receive 100% of whatever they thought they were going to receive—no one disputes that—without the changes that successive Governments have brought in, their position would be considerably worse.

The reality of the situations that the hon. Gentleman outlined is that the difficulties that those companies have got into have been addressed, by and large—there have been some tweaks or changes to the way they have been treated, particularly in respect of British Steel—by the Pension Protection Fund stepping in, by way of introducing a levy on the defined-benefit schemes out there and ensuring that a substantial payment is made from a pension that otherwise would have been lost under the old law. That has been addressed by successive Governments. Clearly this is a matter of great import to
his constituents, and I thank him for bringing it to the House. I hope I have addressed some of the points raised.

Question put and agreed to.

11.26 am

Sitting suspended.

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): I beg to move, That this House has considered imprisonment for public protection.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Edward. Sentences of imprisonment for public protection are an often overlooked part of our criminal justice system, despite their huge impact on those prisoners continuing to serve them. They were intended to protect the public from serious offenders and ensure that dangerous violent and sexual offenders stayed in custody for as long as they presented a risk to society.

Under the IPP regime, offenders given an IPP sentence were set a minimum term that they had to spend in prison, but unlike with most other sentences, there was no upper limit, meaning that once the minimum tariff had been served, the offender must apply to the Parole Board for release. Only if the Parole Board is satisfied that they are not a danger to the public can someone serving an IPP sentence be released. Release is therefore not automatic, and if the Parole Board is not satisfied that someone serving an IPP sentence has demonstrated that they no longer pose a risk, the prisoner can remain in custody indefinitely.

I have discussed these concerns with colleagues, including the shadow Secretary of State for Justice, my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds East (Richard Burgon), who also realises the gravity of this important issue and how it impacts on so many families. That is why I applied for the matter to be debated by right hon. and hon. Members in Parliament.

John Howell (Henley) (Con): The point that the hon. Gentleman has just made is very important. This issue has a big impact on families. I do not think we should lose sight of that as the debate proceeds. The other point is that the number of prisoners who self-harm during these sentences is much higher than the number across the rest of the prison population. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that those two factors should play a part in his thinking?

Mr Dhesi: With great eloquence, the hon. Gentleman has highlighted two of the key reasons why this debate is so important. I concur fully with his views.

In many cases, IPP sentences that had shorter tariffs, of less than two years, have become in effect a life sentence as people have been stuck in limbo, unable to prove that they no longer pose a risk, often for reasons beyond their control. For those IPP-sentenced prisoners, the sentences did not work as intended and instead have become an unfairly punitive aspect of our criminal justice system. I would like to focus my remarks today on those prisoners, as it is those on the shortest tariffs who have experienced the injustice.

Why were IPP sentences abolished in the first place? Although designed to protect the public from serious offenders, IPP sentences were in reality handed down for a far broader range of offences than was intended. They were handed down at the rate of more than 800 a year, moving thousands of people into prison indefinitely. That led to offenders who had committed more minor crimes facing a short tariff but an indefinite sentence.
The Prison Reform Trust published late last year a report that showed that more than half of prisoners still serving an IPP sentence had a tariff of four years or less and 15% had a tariff of less than two years. Custody and imprisonment should be used as a last resort; and indefinite custody, with no fixed end, should be used only where a very serious offence has been committed. I fully appreciate that there are cases in which individuals have committed heinous crimes against humanity and therefore the local communities are extremely concerned about the prisoner’s release. One such case was highlighted to me by the Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union, the hon. Member for Worcester (Mr Walker). He and his predecessor in that seat had both worked with the local community to highlight their very serious concerns about someone who had killed three children and impaled them on railings after murdering them in their home.

However, I am most concerned about the non-serious cases wherein someone is sentenced to a short sentence but ends up being imprisoned for years on end. Where people are safe to be released, we should not be keeping them in custody to serve many multiples of their tariff for many years beyond what they have committed. That stands against the principles of natural justice, on which our justice system was founded. The more widespread use of IPP sentences than was intended has also led to a number of instances in which offenders who committed the same offence in the same context were handed sentences such that one offender could be expected to spend a lot longer in prison.

Even the author of IPP sentencing, David Blunkett, acknowledges that this was a flawed policy. Lord Blunkett has noted:

“...the Criminal Justice Act 2003—
“...in has led, in some cases, to an injustice and I regret that”.

In 2012, the Government rightly took the decision to abolish sentences of imprisonment for public protection for offenders, meaning that that option was no longer available to judges. However, although that was the right decision, the issue remains of what to do to address the situation of those who are currently serving an IPP sentence.

Ellie Reeves (Lewisham West and Penge) (Lab): My hon. Friend is right to recognise that these sentences have now been abolished. The Parole Board previously aimed to get the IPP prisoner population below 1,500 by 2020, but the latest figures show that the number of people still serving IPP sentences is above 2,400. Given that these sentences have actually been abolished, does my hon. Friend agree that those who are continuing to serve them should be re-sentenced under the rules that exist at the moment?

Mr Dhesi: With great telepathy, I, too, will be referring to the Parole Board and the statistic that my hon. Friend has very ably highlighted. I fully agree with her.

As I said, the issue remains of what to do to address the situation of those currently serving an IPP sentence. That is the issue that the current Government have to grapple with. The problem remains a real one for the prisoners, for their families, for the justice system and for wider society, which needs to have confidence in a justice system that rehabilitates people and is fair and proportionate.

Let us examine the continued use of IPP sentences. On 31 March 2019, as my hon. Friend the Member for Lewisham West and Penge (Ellie Reeves) has highlighted, 2,403 prisoners were still serving an IPP sentence and had yet to be released, despite the abolition of these sentences more than seven years ago. Of those prisoners, nine out of 10 have already served the minimum tariff that was handed down to them by the judge at their trial. A large proportion of those still serving an IPP sentence after surpassing their original tariff were initially sent to prison to serve a short tariff. Of the close to 400 people on an IPP sentence with a tariff of less than two years, more than half have served nine years, or more, beyond their original tariff. That is a travesty.

My hon. Friend the Member for Stretford and Urmston (Kate Green), who cannot be here today, has informed me that a recent parliamentary question that she tabled has revealed that there are currently 46 women on IPP sentences, yet the Ministry of Justice does not know how many of those women have children. Given that that is such a low number, and given that the impact of mothers’ imprisonment on children is well documented, I believe that that is a shocking admission. The Parole Board predicts that unless changes are made to the situation faced by IPP prisoners, there will still be 1,500 people in prison serving an IPP sentence by 2020.

To illustrate the issues faced by people still serving IPP sentences, I shall draw attention to some particularly tragic examples of the effect that the indefinite nature of IPP sentences can have on those people sentenced to them.

Jeff Smith (Manchester, Withington) (Lab): Just before my hon. Friend highlights his examples, I will raise the case of my constituent, Wayne Bell, who has had a mental health crisis and is now unable to engage with the parole process. Given that a study a few years ago showed that one in 10 IPP prisoners was seeking psychiatric help in prison, which is double the rate for the normal prison population, does my hon. Friend share my concern that these prisoners can easily get into a downward spiral? They have a mental health crisis and are not able to engage with the parole process, and that makes them more depressed. There is no way out of that downward spiral for them; there is no ability for them to resolve their situation.

Mr Dhesi: My hon. Friend’s excellent point encapsulates the mental health issues and the intertwined nature of what we are discussing. I will elaborate further on the mental health problems faced by prisoners.

In 2009, Tommy Nicol received an IPP sentence with a minimum four-year tariff for stealing a car from a mechanic’s garage and injuring a man’s arm in the process. Once his tariff was completed, the Parole Board refused his request to be released and told him he should access a therapeutic community, in order to address his mental health issues and become safe to be released.

Tommy’s mental health suffered as he was repeatedly denied access to mental health treatment courses. He was moved to prisons that did not even offer those courses, making proving that he had been rehabilitated increasingly difficult. In November 2014, he made a formal complaint saying that IPP sentences were a form of “psychological torture”. Around that time, he also began to self-segregate and went on hunger strike. His
behaviour became increasingly erratic as he understandably struggled to deal with the psychological impact of his situation. Tommy tragically took his own life in prison in September 2015.

James Ward was given an IPP sentence in 2006 with a tariff of only one year for setting light to his mattress while in prison serving a fixed sentence for a fight with his father. He ended up serving not one year but 11 years.

Victoria Prentis: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the case of arsonists is often serious in the IPP sentence structure? Because of the links between arson, sex offending and reckless behaviour, arsonists have been disproportionately affected.

Mr Dhesi: The hon. Lady ably makes the point about arsonists who end up serving a lot longer than they should. It is not fair.

During those 11 years, James Ward regularly self-harmed and his mental health deteriorated significantly. He has since spoken out about the damage that the IPP sentence did to his mental health, telling the “Today” programme:

“Prison is not fit to accommodate people like me with mental health problems. It’s made me worse. How can I change in a place like this? I wake up every morning scared of what the day may hold.”

IPP sentences leave prisoners in limbo, with a lack of access to courses and treatment. Those cases show how much more needs to be done to address the issue faced by those serving IPP sentences. They also highlight a particular issue for IPP-sentenced prisoners, namely being unable to complete the courses that the Parole Board has told them will help to demonstrate that they are safe for release. That is partly because we face an increasingly violent and overcrowded prison system, where there are simply not enough places on development courses and therefore not enough opportunities for short-tariff IPP-sentenced prisoners to demonstrate that they no longer pose a risk.

There are other problems, which are easier to fix. For example, the families of IPP-sentenced prisoners have said that prisoners are prioritised for places on courses based on how close they are to their release date. Because IPP-sentenced prisoners do not have a fixed release date, they fall to the back of the queue and can struggle to ever get on the appropriate courses. I would be grateful if the Minister provided an update on what is being done to address that issue.

IPP sentences have a huge impact on prisoners’ mental health, as they would do on anyone locked up and deprived of their liberty with no end in sight. They create a sense of despair and hopelessness, which can have a significant impact on an individual’s mental health. This is demonstrated by the fact that IPP prisoners are significantly more likely to self-harm than determinate-sentence prisoners and even life-sentence prisoners, which is an amazing statistic. This is borne out by numerous reports, such as those by the Prison Reform Trust, the Sainsbury Centre for Mental Health, the Howard League for Penal Reform and the Institute for Criminal Policy Research at King’s College London.

Her Majesty’s inspectorate of prisons found that IPP prisoners were significantly more likely than life-sentence or determinate-sentence prisoners to have arrived in their current prison with problems, including feeling depressed and suicidal. Mental health issues are already endemic in our prison system, with at least one in three prisoners reported to have mental health issues by Her Majesty’s inspectorate of prisons reports. The real figure is likely to be greater.

Instances of self-harm are already too high, with 55,598 in 2018 alone. We need a comprehensive and fully-funded strategy for the reduction of all forms of violence in prison, including self-harm, and that must include special support for those on IPP sentences. Will the Minister outline what special provision is made to tackle the mental health conditions of IPP prisoners, especially those with shorter tariffs, who have served way beyond their tariff and probably never expected to be in this situation?

Another issue that affects the prisoner’s ability to rehabilitate and turn their life around is recall. When an IPP-sentenced prisoner is released, they are released on licence, with strict licence conditions that must be followed. Breaching those conditions can result in recall to prison. In many cases, that is a correct and appropriate response, but there are cases where technical breaches—for example, missing a probation meeting due to unforeseen illness or travel delays—have resulted in recall to prison. The excessive use of recall to prison for minor breaches of licence has contributed to the number of IPP prisoners remaining in prison staying stubbornly high. Families of those serving IPP sentences have called for a more reasonable approach to recalls to be taken, to ensure that only those breaches that suggest that someone poses a risk should necessitate the deprivation of an individual’s liberty.

Minor breaches of licence conditions are often not crimes in and of themselves, but simple things, such as missing appointments and breaching administrative conditions. The ex-head of the Parole Board told of offenders sent back to prison for turning up drunk at their bail hostel, even though that presented no risk to anybody. Repeated recall to prison while on release on licence also prevents an IPP prisoner from securing housing and holding down a job, both factors that are proven to reduce reoffending rates. Indeed, 936 people on IPP sentences were recalled by the Parole Board in 2017. In the same year, 543 people on IPPs were recalled. This is a complex and serious issue that will be tackled only through proper co-ordination between the Ministry of Justice, prisons, probation services and the police. Will the Minister outline his Government’s strategy to tackle the issue of recall?

The only way that an IPP prisoner can finally be entirely released from their sentence is to apply to the Parole Board, 10 years after their release from custody, to have their licence ended. Many experts and campaigners have rightly pointed out that this is simply too long and sets people up to fail. Does the Minister have plans to amend this?

Before concluding, I will highlight the impact of IPP sentences on our justice system. Such sentences do not just have a detrimental impact on the mental health and stability of offenders, both while in prison and during release on their extraordinarily long licences; they are detrimental to the efficient running of the prison and parole systems. The Parole Board has historically heard the cases of offenders given longer sentences than those who were subject to IPP sentences, but is now forced to conduct a lengthy risk assessment process for short-tariff sentences.
offenders on IPP sentences. There is also no doubt that the rapid increase in the number of prisoners on IPPs contributed to prison overcrowding, which continues, despite the abolition of IPP sentences, because many IPP sentence prisoners face difficulties in demonstrating that they are safe to be released.

The prison population has risen significantly since 1994, especially following changes to minimum sentences since 2000. The UK now has the highest imprisonment rate in western Europe, with 141 prisoners per 100,000 of the population. Our prisons are often dangerously overcrowded, with many prisons operating at significantly over their certified capacity. Such overcrowding has a detrimental impact on safety, which has deteriorated considerably under this Government; prisons are substantially more violent than in the past. Overcrowding has also had an impact on the ability of prisons to rehabilitate offenders effectively; Her Majesty's inspectorate of prisons has repeatedly raised it as an area of concern because it affects the resources available to reduce reoffending.

It is now time for IPP sentences to be resolved. Continued calls for further change—including from former Justice Secretaries, from Her Majesty's chief inspector of prisons and from the chair of the Parole Board—have focused on the unfairness for prisoners who are still serving IPP sentences and on the challenges that they create for the prison system. Abolishing new IPP sentences was the correct course of action, but there is still more to be done to address the issues that face those who were sent to prison for a short tariff that has effectively turned into a life sentence.

The families of those on IPP sentences are making proposals that may well offer a way forward. For example, Donna—the sister of Tommy Nicol, who I referred to earlier—is now campaigning for reforms to the system that prisoners on IPP sentences face. She has called for the sentences of those who are serving initial tariffs of four years or less, as her brother was, to be converted to fixed-length sentences. It is Kafkaesque, and it is not acceptable in our criminal justice system.

It is a great pleasure and honour to follow the excellent speech of the hon. Member for Slough (Mr Dhesi). He has said almost all that needs to be said, so I do not think that colleagues will have any difficulty in keeping to the time limit that you suggest, Sir Edward. He is right, and he fairly said that both sides of the House have been at fault on this difficult issue.

IPP prisoners and their families were the victims of fairly catastrophically bad policy making in the first place. When that was seen and, to my great delight, the system was changed in 2012 by those of us who were then in power—not that I was at the time, directly, but I was a civil servant working in the field—a residue was left because the changes were not made retrospective. As the hon. Gentleman said, that has left the fate of these people as a stain on our system. They are the victims of poor policy making, but also of enormous churn at the Ministry of Justice.

As ever, it is a great pleasure to see my dear friend the prisons Minister in his place. I hope that he will be allowed to stay in post long enough to sort out this matter and several others—including children's criminal records, about which I will talk to him later. It is very important that we get on quickly with the reforms that my right hon. Friend the Member for Surrey Heath (Michael Gove) posited when he appeared before the Select Committee on Justice in July 2016. In answer to my fairly brusque questions about whether he would “consider changing the release test or other legislative change” to help IPP prisoners, he told me that he was “actively considering” it. Unfortunately, the following day he was moved on. That has been the picture of my attempts to get Ministers to engage with the issue over the past four years, so I very much hope that we will hang on to the present Minister long enough for him to do something about it.

The test for the release of IPP prisoners is very high. As Dr Harry Annison of Southampton Law School noted in written evidence to our Committee, IPP sentences fall “little short of life imprisonment”. As I said in my intervention earlier, I am particularly concerned about those convicted of arson offences. The Committee heard evidence about a man who was convicted for a minimum of 10 months in 2006 and was not released for 11 years. I also remember from when I was in practice an extraordinary case of an individual who had been convicted for setting fire to a pair of church curtains and was still in prison very many years later; the reasons and lifestyle that had led to the original offence really did not make him a continuing risk to society. The hon. Member for Slough has already spoken, as I am sure other hon. Members will, about the horrific despair of individuals in prison who do not know when they will be released. It is Kafkaesque, and it is not acceptable in our criminal justice system.

IPPs were used far more widely than was intended. They were often given to offenders who committed low-level crimes with very short tariffs of less than two years. They were often handed out at an extraordinary rate when they were first introduced. They proved very difficult to understand, they left victims and families uncertain about how and when people would be released, and they have led to real inconsistencies in sentencing. The sentence created its own complexities that were not
fully foreseen when it was conceived. The test for release was set at a very high threshold, which has led to real problems with mental health, suicide and self-harm; the hon. Gentleman has already gone into those, so I will not.

There is good news, however: since 2017, there has been a concerted effort by the Prison Service, the probation service and the Parole Board to progress cases. In 2017-18, the Parole Board ordered the release of more than 900 IPP prisoners, including the re-release of some who had been recalled. The hon. Gentleman asked the Minister to go into recall in some detail; that is important across the Prison Service in general, and particularly with this cohort, for which there are real concerns about how the recall system is being used.

There is a great deal more to do. Immediate action could be taken, without legislative change, on treatment programmes. The Parole Board and prison psychologists have gone to enormous lengths to say that there are options other than treatment programmes that demonstrate the case for release, but boards remain very influenced by programmes that offenders have undertaken.

I am concerned generally about treatment programmes and their evaluation. We held up the sex offender treatment programme as a gold standard for many years, and then we got rid of it overnight and brought in new systems because it was proved not to work. I was interested by the response to a recent Freedom of Information request from Transform Justice, which showed that 95% of accredited programmes have no impact evaluation. I am really worried about the undue weight that boards are placing on programmes that have not been properly evaluated. The lack of provision of such programmes is effectively keeping people in prison without real evidence that it is the right place for them. May we please have urgent action, Minister, on treatment programmes and their evaluation, as well as real direction, so that we do not over-rely on programmes that have not been fully evaluated?

In the “Prison Population 2022” report, which the Justice Committee published in March, and in the Government response, which they very kindly gave us yesterday, there is a great deal of common ground between the Government and the Justice Committee. I am sure that my hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Robert Neill), the Chairman of the Justice Committee, will go into them further, but there are very good practical suggestions in the report from the Howard League and from the Parole Board itself on how to deal with IPP prisoners. I encourage the Minister to take all of them on board. However, I have to say that I, along with others on the Justice Committee, would go further. We think that these prisoners represent such a blight on our justice system that legislative change is the only way forward.

3 pm

David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Slough (Mr Dhesi) for his contribution in opening this debate.

I want to say something at the very beginning that I hope Members will regard as helpful. All those in prison under an IPP sentence are there because at some point they committed a crime and hurt a victim. We should not forget that in this debate, because there are many people in prison for serious offences that have caused a great harm to people in the community. The question we are considering today is: how do we achieve a balance between punishment of those individuals for their offences and providing a helpful pathway to rehabilitation?

When it was introduced originally, the IPP sentence gave a minimum term, but also set out a series of conditions by which the risk that an individual who has committed an offence poses to society has to be assessed, in order for them to reach a standard that would allow them to be released back into the community.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): I am glad that the right hon. Gentleman has zoned in on what should be the two central pillars of our justice system. Does he agree that wider society needs to see rehabilitation—the second pillar that he talked about—as one way to help to reduce the risk of reoffending, so that people can have more confidence in the justice system?

David Hanson: Absolutely. The hon. Gentleman—or my hon. Friend, as I will still call him in this case—makes a key point.

The key issue that I want to raise is this. Many IPP prisoners have passed the minimum tariffs—we have heard today the figure of 2,400 prisoners currently serving over-tariff IPP sentences and now, because of where we are in the timeline, many are serving severely over-tariff IPP sentences. There are many individuals for whom we need to find a pathway, to give them clarity and to enable them to reach a conclusion after they have served their minimum term and paid back to society, but we also need clarity about their rehabilitation and ultimate release.

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): The right hon. Gentleman is speaking with his characteristic eloquence. Kevin Willis, a constituent of mine, has served 13 years in custody, which is the equivalent of a 26-year determinate sentence, after being sentenced to an IPP with a four-year tariff. As the right hon. Gentleman indicated, Kevin Willis committed a serious crime and deserved to go to prison. However, does the right hon. Gentleman agree that this kind of legal limbo, whereby Kevin has no idea when or even if he will be released, is unconscionable? Also, members of the public will find it hard to understand why some people serve only half the sentence that is announced on the steps of a court, while others seem to serve many multiples of their sentence. That is another problem that affects faith in the justice system.

David Hanson: I agree with the hon. Gentleman, in the sense that we have to assess the risk that an individual potentially presents to society. We have a minimum term; people have passed that minimum term; we now have an element of indeterminate sentencing, whereby risk is assessed and release happens when that risk is deemed to be sufficiently low for the prisoner to be released back into society.

I want to know from the Minister what assessment is being made of the current potential risk from the 2,400 prisoners serving IPP sentences, including 43 women. The reason they are still in prison is either that they have been moved from prison to prison and not been
tracked effectively, or the courses to help with their rehabilitation have not been made available, or they pose a risk because of the deterioration of their mental health while in prison or because of other issues, as my hon. Friend the Member for Slough said. What assessment has the Minister made of those prisoners, and how can he prove that there are pathways for each of those individuals? That is the key thing that I want to know from the Minister in this debate.

It seems to me that there are three clear pathways left for individuals with IPP sentences. Either we have a rehabilitation pathway that says, “These individuals need to complete these courses in order to reach a stage where the Parole Board can assess them to be a low risk to society and therefore eligible for release,” or, if there is not a rehabilitation pathway, we might need to consider resentencing, so that there is a definitive end-date to their sentences, or the crime is such that, whatever current pathways are operational through rehabilitation, the end-date, which might be some years hence, needs to be reassessed and might take into account time already served. What we need for each of those 2,400 individuals is clarity about what their sentences will ultimately mean.

In the Justice Committee, we produced a report that indicates that we want to see that clarity, and we have said that we would like to see legislative solutions for both release and recall of indeterminate-sentence prisoners, to ensure sentencing certainty on this issue. Helpfully, the Minister of State, the hon. and learned Member forSouth Swindon (Robert Buckland), has this week published his response to our report, as has been mentioned. I want to complete my brief remarks by asking a couple of questions about the Government response.

In their response, the Government have said:

“We are committed to providing long-term prisoners with opportunities for rehabilitation, so they can demonstrate they can be released safely back into the community and we welcome the Committee’s acknowledgement of our efforts to improve the progression prospects of IPP prisoners”.

How many assessments have been made of those prisoners and what is the pathway for them? The Minister also said in his response that the Government “are continuing to prioritise post-tariff prisoners in accessing rehabilitative interventions, including Psychology Services-led reviews, and enhanced case management for those prisoners with a complex set of risks and needs. We have also developed Progression Regimes at four prisons across the country”.

How many prisoners currently on that list of 2,400 does that cover? The Minister has also said that the Government are “progressing indeterminate prisoners struggling to achieve release via the usual routes.”

With all the things that the Minister says he is doing in response to the Justice Committee’s report, at what date does he estimate that the current number of 2,400 over-tariff IPP prisoners will be in a position to be forwarded to the Parole Board for assessment? [Interruption.]

The Minister looks quizzical, but that is a question that he needs to answer, because if he has an end-date, he needs a programme to get to it. He needs to assess those 2,400 individuals, see what courses they need to undertake, establish the elements of risk in those cases, and determine whether those 2,400 individuals will reach a threshold for release. We accepted in our report that there are those within that 2,400 who might never be released because they may still pose a threat to society. Nevertheless, that is still a time-pathway conclusion that the Minister and his Department can reach on an individual.

My simple plea is this: when and how? If resentencing is required to provide clarity, when will that happen? Ultimately, the key thing that I want from this debate is clarity, and that might mean a long time further in prison or a course to help to release somebody in due course, but clarity is needed.

Finally, I go back to where I started. We should not forget the victim of the original crime and there should be some discussion and some conclusion as part of these pathways about victim management for those against whom the original crimes were committed.

3.8 pm

Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): As always, Sir Edward, it is a pleasure to see you in the Chair. I congratulate the hon. Member for Slough (Mr Dhesi) on securing an important debate on an important subject.

I am delighted to see the Minister in his place. He has had a long and distinguished career at the criminal Bar, so he will know, as well as any of us who have seen this type of sentencing in practice, that this is an unconscionable situation, which is the result of a policy in the past that was well intended but, frankly, an error. That error was corrected, but not corrected retrospectively, hence the decision reached by the High Court and the Supreme Court that they could not interfere with sentences that, at the time they were issued, had been lawfully given, as the then Lord Chief Justice, Lord Thomas, said. However, that does not remove the political and moral conundrum that faces us.

The right hon. Member for Delyn (David Hanson), a fellow member of the Select Committee, very fairly points out, as we accept in our Select Committee report, “Prison population 2022”, that there will indeed be a number—perhaps a significant number, but I suspect not a majority—of IPP prisoners who are unlikely to be safe to be released in any significant period of time and perhaps never. I suspect they are a minority, but there will be some. Nobody has an issue with that, but certainty is important for them and for the victims of their grave crimes, so that they know that that will be the case.

Alex Chalk: In those circumstances, the defendants probably ought not to have been sentenced to an IPP in the first place, but to a life sentence. If that is the case, the correct thing is to put that right rather than continue with the fiction that they are on an IPP with a tariff that they have long since superseded.

Robert Neill: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. His experience at the criminal Bar leads him to the same conclusion as mine leads me to. Given that the situation is unacceptable for the reasons that have been highlighted by the right hon. Member for Delyn, and highlighted in detail by my hon. Friend the Member for Banbury (Victoria Prentis), my fellow Select Committee member, it is unacceptable that we should leave a situation in which some people are in limbo.

One such case was illustrated in our Select Committee report in evidence from the sister of an IPP prisoner who died after a self-harm incident in prison. That individual
Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the hon. Member for Slough (Mr Dhesi) for securing this debate. I also thank the other Members who have made contributions.

I can fully understand the concerns that have been expressed today, and I aim someone who firmly believes in the punishment fitting the crime. I have long had an issue with the release of sexual predators back into society. Indeed, there was recently an issue with an offender who had a long history of sexual offences in my constituency, who was repeatedly inappropriate with young children. The community carried out a citizen’s arrest when he was caught in the midst of a lewd act. As a consequence of running away from a person walking by who witnessed the act, the perpetrator was injured. My point is that, had he not been released, it would have been better for the offender, who truly seems unable to keep himself under control, and most certainly better for the young girls who have had their innocence stolen and are unable to undo or unsee the acts that he carried out in front of them. I want to get that story in at the beginning, because I agree with the Members who said that the punishment must fit the crime. I am clearly of that ilk as well.

At the same time, we recognise the pressures on the prison and parole systems. Before they can be released, prisoners serving indefinite sentences have to demonstrate that they have addressed their offending behaviour and are no longer a risk to society.

On 21 June 2011, the day the Legal Aid, Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Bill was published, the then Prime Minister, David Cameron, gave a press conference and said, “we’re going to review the existing system urgently with a view to replacing it with an alternative that is clear, tough and better understood by the public.”

So there have been lots of requests for change. On 20 April 2016, the then Justice Secretary, the right hon. Member for Surrey Heath (Michael Gove), wrote to the Chair of the Justice Committee about prison reform. He said that although he had no current plans to change the statutory test for releasing prisoners after completion of the tariff, there were initiatives to help IPP prisoners to make progress towards release. There has therefore been much talk about this during the time that I have been in this House, and I suspect long before that as well.

I can fully understand the reason why such sentences were given, but I also understand that our duty of care to the prisoner means that we need to have rehabilitation in place to ensure that they can get back into the community if they are fit to do so. I am possibly from a generation that believes that there are consequences for actions, and the consequence of a sexual offence should mean curtailment of freedom, especially for those who seem likely to reoffend. We need to remember that it is not about a number on a page or a statistic, but about children: little boys and girls whose innocence has been stolen and who will battle with that loss all of their lives.

It is not simply a matter of removing that person from the prison and parole systems. Before they can be released, prisoners serving indefinite sentences have to demonstrate that they have addressed their offending behaviour and are no longer a risk to society.
When an offender commits a sexual offence, he or she needs to know that their actions will result in their removal from society until it is deemed safe for them to return to society; and even then it will not be without changes. No one can commit such offences and return to their life; it is irrevocably changed. To be honest, I feel little or no sympathy for them. My sympathy is reserved for the victims. We must be able to ensure that those who are likely to offend or present a danger are kept away from the vulnerable and from communities.

Do we need to change the system? Yes, we do. Do we need to make it more effective? Undoubtedly. Do we need to provide help and assistance to those who struggle with urge and impulse control? Definitely. Do we need to have a form of rehabilitation that truly prepares the inmate for the real world? Certainly. Are the vulnerable in the community the ones whom we must serve in any decision to release an IPP offender? Absolutely. There must be a bottom line in any change. I am sure that the Minister who will respond to the debate will consider that, when making any suggestions for change.

3.20 pm

**Gloria De Piero** (Ashfield) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Edward. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Slough (Mr Dhesi) on securing the debate and making a comprehensive, detailed and powerful argument about the injustices of what are supposedly short-term sentences.

There has been much agreement in the debate, so we await solid answers from the Government about the action they will take on this important issue. As my hon. Friend the Member for Lewisham West and Penge (Ellie Reeves) pointed out, there were 2,403 prisoners still serving IPP sentences, yet to be released, as of March this year, and 90% of them have already served the minimum tariff handed down by the judge at their trial.

We cannot say that enough has been done in the seven years since the change. As the Chair of the Justice Committee, the hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Robert Neill), put it, the policy has been corrected, but not retrospectively. That means that thousands of people, when they return to society, are victims of pretty catastrophic policy making.

A study published for the Griffins Society in 2019 examined the impact on women serving IPP sentences. Six of the nine women interviewed had tried to commit suicide multiple times during the same sentence, and three of the nine had had their children taken into care. Those are significant risks for the 43 women still serving IPP sentences today, and their innocent families. I would love to know what action the Government have taken on the matter. What have they done, for instance, in response to the family of Tommy Nicol who, as we have heard, died by suicide while serving an IPP sentence? His sister Donna has called for the sentences of those serving initial tariffs of four years or less to be converted to fixed sentences. It seems that that could be a commonsense way to tackle the ongoing injustice of IPP prisoners.

The impact on those serving IPP sentences and their families is heartbreaking. We have heard of people who have self-harmed and died by suicide in prison. The shocking fact, mentioned by many of those who spoke, that IPP prisoners are significantly more likely to self-harm than both determinate-sentence prisoners and life-sentence prisoners, goes to show the urgency with which the Government need to tackle the issue. As the hon. Member for Banbury (Victoria Prentis) made clear, IPP prisoners are victims of pretty catastrophic policy making.

Alex Chalk: I agree with every word that the hon. Lady is saying. The punishment must fit the crime, but does she agree that the real concern is that the punishments are not what judges handed down in court, when they had all the facts before them, but are increasingly the preserve of the people, within custody, who apply often completely extraneous considerations?

Gloria De Piero: That point is well made and I thank the hon. Gentleman.

The argument against IPP sentencing is clear, and the Government do not seem to disagree with us on that simple question of justice: indefinite custody with no fixed end should be used only for the most serious offences, where the public would be genuinely at risk. We have heard many examples where that was not really the case, and where relatively minor crimes are still being punished disproportionately with what some feel amounts to a life sentence. The Howard League for Penal Reform has said that

“this cohort of prisoners had particular difficulties with anxiety as they saw others who had been convicted of similar crimes after 2006 enter and leave prison while they were detained substantially beyond their tariff date.”

Where people are safe to be released, we should quite clearly not be keeping them in custody to serve their sentence many times over. It is against all the most basic principles of fairness and justice, and the punishment must fit the crime—a point that the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) stressed in his speech.

Alex Chalk: I agree with every word that the hon. Lady is saying. The punishment must fit the crime, but does she agree that the real concern is that the punishments are not what judges handed down in court, when they had all the facts before them, but are increasingly the preserve of the people, within custody, who apply often completely extraneous considerations?

Gloria De Piero: That point is well made and I thank the hon. Gentleman.

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What is the Government’s position on that?

We can talk about the flaws in the original policy of IPP itself. We all agree on that. However, a major reason why many prisoners who have served their time are still waiting in limbo is the chronic mismanagement of the justice system that the Government have presided over. That mismanagement affects everyone involved in our prison system—not just prisoners with IPP sentences.

We have heard about prisoners who have been asked to demonstrate commitment to therapy for mental health issues, to prove that they are fit for release, but who have no access to such therapy in the prison they are in. That is in part due to the sheer numbers of people on waiting lists for those much-needed courses in our overcrowded prisons. I have urged the Government before, and I will urge them again, to take action on the deficit in mental health provision in all parts of society. However, one in three prisoners has mental health issues and the people involved are often more of a risk to society, so surely prison is one area where particular attention is given to mental health provision. Can the Minister tell me what the Government are doing to make mental health a priority in our prisons?
There are other reasons for the situation, specific to IPP prisoners, that would be far easier to fix. We have heard in the debate about prisoners being given access to important courses of the kind I mentioned based on how close they are to their release date, which in the case of an IPP prisoner is indefinite. If we are serious about rehabilitation, those prisoners will need more support on their release from prison. When people emerge from prison to a housing market in crisis, low-paid and insecure work as the only option, and a safety net that has been slashed by austerity over the past decade of Tory rule, it is unsurprising that reoffending rates are so abysmal.

Although the important issue of IPP sentences is, quite rightly, the focus of today’s discussion, we are speaking about it in the context of a wider justice system that is falling apart. Many prisons are operating at significantly over their certified capacity. That overcrowding is just one factor that has led to prisons becoming substantially more violent in recent years.

The deficit in the provision of courses that make recidivism less likely, including training for work and mental health therapy, is in part due to the impossible number of prisoners on the waiting list in any given prison. Those problems are especially acute for the IPP prisoners who are the subject of the debate, but they affect all types of prisoners and, with them, our broader social fabric. That is what will really put public safety at risk—not the release of prisoners who may well be ready to reintegrate into society but who are not given a chance to prove it. What are the Government doing about overcrowding, and how many more Tommy Nicols are we likely to lose while we wait for them to take action?

3.27 pm

The Minister of State, Ministry of Justice (Robert Buckland): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Edward; as a former member of the legal profession, you will have a particular interest in this important issue. I congratulate the hon. Member for Slough (Mr Dhesi) on securing the debate. I know that he has long had an interest in such issues, and I have debated them with him before in my former capacity as a Law Officer. It is a pleasure now to be able to address the hon. Gentleman and other right hon. and hon. Members as Minister of State for Justice.

We can all agree that the sentence of imprisonment for public protection has long been a source of great concern. I well remember the introduction of that type of sentence, pursuant to the Criminal Justice Act 2003. The provision came into force in 2005, and initially it was used quite often.

The sentence was applicable to and used for a range of offences, including serious assault, threats to kill, arson and a range of other offences that we have heard about today; those are, of course, serious, but I do not think that the courts at the time envisaged what the full consequences would be. Indeed, there is a Court of Appeal authority, from the case of Lang, which, importantly, limited the ways in which IPP sentences could be used. It had an immediate effect on the range of uses of the sentence. There was legislative change in 2008 after another Court of Appeal case in which serious concerns were raised about the system’s ability to cope with the relevant cohort of prisoners. Quite rightly, in 2012 the sentence was abolished by the Government under the Legal Aid, Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Act 2012.

The IPP population consisted of many dangerous offenders who often had committed serious violent or sexual offences. At the time there was evidence before the courts of troubling escalations of behaviour, prior to the offending that led to an IPP sentence. The policy that underlay the imposition of that regime was twofold—first, the punishment of offenders, but also a specific public protection function was part of the underlying policy introduced by the Labour Government, who for the first time enjoined sentencers to consider future risk. That was unprecedented: the issue had not been approached in such a way, and it introduced a clearly delineated function that was to be exercised in the form of a determination of dangerousness. Judges were asked to make a decision based on the information and evidence before them—either a pre-sentence report, a psychiatric assessment, or the serious nature of the offence itself—and determine whether an offender was dangerous enough to merit an IPP.

That was the law and policy at the time. We rightly now look back on that with concern and the wisdom of 15 years’ experience, and realise that it has led to some of the cases we have heard about today, and many other cases that we have dealt with in our constituency casework. That was the reality of the situation facing the courts then, and although I hear the view expressed by many right hon. and hon. Members about the possibility of changing the law to effectively re-sentence those offenders, we must take some care. It could be done—there is no immutable bar to passing legislation that would have a retrospective effect, but there is a sensitivity in cutting across the original sentence and the finding of the court. It will be difficult for a fresh sentencer to put themselves entirely in the position of the sentencing judge at the time of the offence, which is why I hesitate before accepting the strong views put forward by hon. Members.

Alex Chalk: The Minister makes an entirely fair point, but he began by acknowledging that there are people in custody who have served time far beyond what the original sentencing judge anticipated. My constituent has served 13 years after an IPP with a four-year tariff. I recognise the difficulties with re-sentencing, but should we not be concerned when people are in custody for far longer than the original sentencing judge had in mind?

Robert Buckland: My hon. Friend has considerable experience of criminal practice, and he has dealt with many cases of great seriousness. He is right to draw to my attention the specific case of his constituent. We can deal with this problem in other ways, and I will outline those to the House as I develop my remarks. Indeed, I hope specifically to answer the queries that have properly been raised by right hon. and hon. Members.

Robert Neill: May I supplement the intervention from my hon. Friend the Member for Cheltenham? The Minister refers to the difficulties of putting oneself in the position of the sentencing judge, but no one is likely to have been better placed to understand those difficulties than the former Lord Chief Justice,
when he made his observations in the course of a judgment in the Court of Appeal. We know that there are circumstances—for example, when a sentence is reviewed for other reasons—when the court will, for reasons of good public policy, embark on that difficult exercise. Although this issue must be borne in mind, there is precedent for demonstrating that it is not an insuperable obstacle.

Robert Buckland: I agree that in the appellant procedure there will often be that check and balance, but this is slightly different. This would be a change in the law and legal framework to alter the position from the one that applied when the offender was sentenced, to the position now. Whether we like it or not that is a departure, and we must be careful to avoid setting inadvertent precedents.

We must be able fully to reflect on the assessment of risk that was made by the learned judge at the time of sentencing. In other words, how does a court properly assess the length of a determinate sentence—that, presumably, is the aim of right hon. and hon. Members—and decide whether or not to take the further step of imposing a life sentence, which might be appropriate in some very serious cases? I do not pretend that these issues are easy, but neither is it a matter that the Government should do nothing about. Other measures we are taking are already yielding significant results, not just in reducing the number of prisoners held under this regime, but also ensuring that more eligible prisoners can be considered as quickly as possible.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Robert Neill), Chair of the Justice Committee, mentioned the remarks of the then Lord Chief Justice, Lord Thomas of Cwmgiedd, who spoke not just about changing the statutory provision, but about changing the test for release, which is important. I think he would concede that the test for the release of prisoners held under this sort of regime must be as consistent as possible, bearing in mind the different classes of prisoners who are held in custody either on minimum terms or subject to parole.

We must take great care not to create too many different tests that could mean that one group of prisoners could be treated in a different or more favourable way than another group. I do not say that the argument has no merit, but there are difficulties in creating potential inconsistencies. It is beholden on me, both as a lawyer and now in this position of great responsibility, to ensure that the unforeseen consequences that occurred with this policy making do not repeat themselves thanks to any change we may make.

Let me develop the point about the ways we can best support prisoners to show that they can safely be released—that is the solution that staves us in the face regarding so many people in that position. As the hon. Member for Ashfield (Gloria De Piero) laid out well, ensuring public protection from violent and sexual crime must be paramount, and our continuing efforts to rehabilitate prisoners subject to this regime are bearing fruit. We have seen a dramatic fall in the IPP prison population over the past years, and the figures cited by the hon. Member for Lewisham West and Penge (Ellie Reeves), and others, are correct. It is a dramatic fall, although I accept that there is still a significant cohort, and we must also not forget that a number of IPP prisoners have been recalled—I will come to that in a moment. However, progress is being made in the right direction.

In January 2016, more than three years ago, a joint HM Prison and Probation Service and Parole Board action plan was drawn up to deal with IPPs. Initially it was primarily focused on improving the efficiency of the parole process, because at that time there was a significant backlog in listing oral hearings for IPP and life-sentence prisoners. As a result of receiving additional resources and changing some of its processes, the Parole Board and the public protection casework section of the Ministry of Justice made progress, and their combined effect was to eliminate that backlog. Simply having a more efficient system resulted in a significant improvement to the pace with which IPP prisoners were released. Following those improvements, the plan was expanded to include a greater focus on those prisoners who, even with a much more efficient parole system, needed additional support to reduce their own risk and secure a release decision from the board.

What was done? A central case file review, by senior psychologists, of IPP prisoners who had not made the anticipated progress achieved considerable success. Out of 1,365 completed reviews, 233 prisoners in these most challenging cases achieved release, with a further 401 moving to a progression regime. We have put in place enhanced case management for the most complex cases, so that a multidisciplinary team can work together to remove barriers to progression.

The joint IPP action plan has also overseen further improvements to the process and, perhaps most significantly, we have opened three new progression regimes, building on the success and the outstanding reputation of the first such regime, which was established at Warren Hill. Those sites operate a staged regime of increasing freedom and responsibility, allowing evidence to build on offenders’ ability to manage their own risks. The rate of release from a progression regime is higher than the average release rate across all Parole Board hearings, which is something that, I think, all right hon. and hon. Members will welcome.

As comprehensive as the plan and the opportunities it provides to IPP prisoners is, the decision actively to engage with efforts that promote rehabilitation, and so demonstrate that there can be safe release back into the community, must ultimately be for each individual prisoner. In my view, that is why Her Majesty’s Prison and Probation Service change programme, in delivering a new offender management model, is fundamental, not only for IPP prisoners but for all offenders. With increased staffing, and the introduction of the key worker role in all prisons, staff will be better equipped, and given more time, to work with individuals who may not be engaging in the way they need to do to reduce their risk.

We are aware that some prisoners may well have become demoralised, with no fixed date of release and the prospect of a further parole hearing currently not holding much hope for them. Here, the key worker will need to get alongside the prisoner and build hope from the foundation of a strong relationship, encouraging them to grasp the opportunities that are available.

David Hanson: It is not unreasonable to ask at what stage that process will be completed for prisoners currently serving IPP sentences.

Robert Buckland: The right hon. Gentleman asks that question again, and I take it fairly and squarely. The answer must be that it will be on a case-by-case basis,
because each prisoner has an individual story and set of needs, and that does not merit a one-size-fits-all approach. Frankly, the cohort we are now dealing with will probably be the tougher end of the spectrum. I think that the right hon. Gentleman conceded quite properly that there will be a cohort of IPP prisoners who may never be released because of the seriousness of the offences and the risk they still pose—I know he accepts that. Therefore, I cannot give him a figure or a timescale, but I can say that the work that is going on has shown a vast increase in the pace with which we have achieved release and resolution. The model we are now adopting will, I believe, lead to even greater engagement.

As the months go by, the right hon. Gentleman can, of course, hold me to account, and if there is no progress he will rightly ask me the questions and I, independently, will ask civil servants why the initial progress has not been maintained. As a member of the Justice Committee, he will hold me to account for that.

I want to deal with more of the figures we were looking at. We have rightly heard about the overall unreleased IPP population. About 200 of that cohort of 2,400 have yet to serve their minimum tariff. As I said, we have made progress in reducing that population. In 2017-18, the Parole Board progressed to open conditions or released about three out of every four IPP prisoners who appeared before it. As I was saying, the cohort becomes increasingly challenging, which will require increasingly intensive rehabilitation. Rehabilitating, and assessing the risk presented by, these prisoners, many of whom, sadly, have committed serious sexual offences against children, is particularly challenging. The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) opened his remarks by referring to that sort of horrendous offence and the need for public protection. It should be acknowledged that some IPP prisoners may never be released because the risk they pose is just too great for safe management in the community.

We are working to reduce the incidence of self-harm among IPP prisoners as part of our prison safety programme and here, again, the key worker will perform a vital role. Additionally, Her Majesty’s Prison and Probation Service is improving the process for people at risk of suicide or self-harm. We have improved prevention training for nearly 25,000 prison staff and have refreshed our partnership with Samaritans for three years, with £1.5 million in funding to support the excellent listeners scheme, through which prisoners are trained to provide support to their fellow prisoners—peer-to-peer support that we all know works in so many settings.

Working to address broader mental health issues in the IPP population remains important. Since last April, we have a new national partnership agreement for prison health. Mental health services are available in all prisons. Turning for a moment to the issue of women IPP prisoners, I am glad to say that they have a dedicated senior psychologist providing a specific progression pathway, and support from a multidisciplinary team to deal with some of the mental health challenges they face.

The commissioning of mental health services by NHS partners is based on a local assessment of health needs, and the services are provided to prisoners on the basis of individual need, which, when we think about it, has to be right. The one-size-fits-all approach does not work, as we know, when it comes to mental health. Independent professionally trained clinicians carry out assessments, and no one is refused access where there is an assessed need. We are well aware that many of those serving IPP sentences experience mental health difficulties, and part of the action plan aims to ensure access to appropriate treatment. An example that I mentioned earlier is the case file reviews carried out by senior psychologists. Alongside those who have been released or moved to open conditions, 54 of those reviewed have been transferred to secure hospitals, where they can receive the best treatment for their needs.

The issue of recall has properly been raised. With regard to the test of recall, it is important to reiterate that it is stringent when it comes to IPP offenders. They can be recalled only when their behaviour and the nature of the licence breach indicate a causal link to their original offending and that the public are at risk of further serious, violent or sexual offending. That is a different, and more stringent, test for recall than that which exists elsewhere in the system.

Work is being done to ensure that recall is properly focused only where it is necessary to protect the public, and efforts are being made to keep offenders on licence in the community wherever possible. Those efforts include the creation of new guidance for probation officers on licence variations of alternatives to recall, and on best practice in the management of offenders on licence, to improve their compliance and prevent the risk from escalating.

A new power to release IPP prisoners on the papers is being used for those on recall. The Parole Board has introduced a quicker, 48-hour turnaround time to consider licence variation requests from probation, to support continued management on licence in the community. We are investigating the rise in the number of IPP prisoners on recall, to see how that rate can safely be reduced and, citing the hon. Member for Ashfield, to get the balance right between the need to protect the public and the need to rehabilitate offenders.

A number of cases were raised with me. I agree that that of Wayne Bell is concerning and I understand that he is now receiving treatment for his mental health issues in an appropriate setting, which is welcome. The troubling case of Tommy Nicol was properly raised. My predecessor, my right hon. Friend the Member for Penrith and The Border (Rory Stewart), met with Donna Mooney, Mr Nicol’s sister, earlier this year. We remain in contact with her at an official and, I very much hope—although I am a new Minister—a ministerial level. We have another meeting with her planned for the autumn. It is a particularly tragic case, but I assure right hon. and hon. Members that we will continue to work with her to address the concerns that she raises with such dignity and clarity.

My hon. Friend the Member for Banbury (Victoria Prentis), who sadly has been called away, asked about the work led by the University of Southampton. We are very much aware of the work of Professor Harry Annison, who works in partnership with the Prison Reform Trust and has already given us an important insight into the impact on families of their loved ones serving IPP sentences. I am looking forward to seeing the conclusions of the next stage of his work, which is currently being supported by IPP and family leads from Her Majesty’s Prison and Probation Service. With regard to the entire
IPP population and the action plan, although I am not able specifically to indicate the number currently subject to that action plan, I assure the House that it is having a wide-ranging effect and will continue to be implemented.

I have lived with the IPP regime for much of my professional and political life. I am profoundly grateful to the hon. Member for Slough for having raised this issue today, allowing us to debate it in a calm and considered way that reflects the genuine concerns of the families of people who are subject to that regime, but also understands the enduring and important function that the justice system plays in protecting the public from serious and violent offences. I believe that the best approach is for us to continue our successful efforts to help those offenders rehabilitate, and redouble those efforts whenever necessary and whenever an offender wishes to engage. That will provide the best chance for those prisoners to become once again law-abiding members of the very communities that we are seeking to protect.

3.51 pm

Mr Dhesi: I thank the right hon. and hon. Members who have taken time to engage in this important debate. I think you would agree, Sir Edward, that there has been consensus and agreement on so many issues, between the shadow Minister, my good friend the hon. Member for Ashfield (Gloria De Piero), members of Select Committees including the Select Committee on Justice, and that Committee’s Chair, the hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Robert Neill).

However, I fear that the Minister has responded with a great deal of hesitation and caution, which does not befit the urgency of the action that is required. Although we should not forget the victim, the punishment must fit the crime. We cannot ignore the glaring official statistics on excessive sentences, the mental health problems of prisoners, or the need for a rehabilitation pathway. We cannot leave people in limbo. Sentences need to be determinate, not indefinite. Although we have corrected the policy, we have not done so retrospectively, and the current situation—as other right hon. and hon. Members have pointed out—is simply unconscionable and unacceptable. That is why I urge the Minister to take urgent action to resolve this unsatisfactory situation.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered imprisonment for public protection.

3.53 pm

Sitting suspended.

Cambridgeshire and Peterborough CCG: Funding Pressures

4 pm

Heidi Allen (South Cambridgeshire) (Ind): I beg to move,

That this House has considered Cambridgeshire and Peterborough CCG funding pressures.

I start by thanking the Backbench Business Committee for granting me this short debate and you, Mr Hollobone, for chairing it. I also thank the Minister for his time.

I represent South Cambridgeshire, which is a largely rural constituency, although it also contains part of Cambridge, which is the fastest growing city in the UK: it grew on average by 7% every single year from 2010 to 2015, and since then has continued growing beyond the national average. There is no doubt that the economy, which is spun out of Cambridge University, is world class. It is equally no surprise, therefore, that the Government are keen to connect us with Oxford, another world-leading, rapidly growing city. Beyond the exceptional levels of growth that we are already experiencing, the Oxford-to-Cambridge expressway and rail line will create a further 1 million homes, so how can it be that the health funding allocated to our clinical commissioning group is based on an assumption that we are growing more slowly than the rest of the UK?

The NHS funding formula has determined that our population is growing at 0.1% below the England average, when in reality growth across the whole county has been 0.6% above the England average over the past four years. That difference matters. In population terms, the Office for National Statistics, from which the NHS draws its calculations, predicts that our population will be 988,000 by 2021, while our known and planned housing growth means our population will in fact be 1,022,000. That is known housing growth, before we even consider the additional housing that will come from the Cambridge to Oxford project.

I must tell the Minister that that is not all. The money we receive per head of population is also significantly lower than it should be. In fact, all our neighbouring CCGs are better funded than we are. In Cambridgeshire and Peterborough, we receive £1,125 per capita, as compared with £1,244 in Bedfordshire, £1,288 in West Suffolk and a staggering £1,497 in Norfolk. How does the Minister consider that to be fair, when we have one of the greatest and fastest growing ageing populations and severe areas of deprivation in Fenland and some of the Cambridge city wards? Those issues of unfair per capita funding and incorrect growth forecasting have the compound effect of making us the third-lowest funded CCG in the country.

On top of that, we have been given a £55 million savings target for this year alone, which amounts to 4.5% of our entire budget. We have an allocation uplift of 5.67%, or £66.7 million, but we are already committed to nationally mandated costs of £70 million, so the numbers just do not add up. In simple terms, despite our growth, we have less money to fund health services for the people of Cambridgeshire and Peterborough in 2019-20 than we did in 2018-19, and that is set to get worse.
Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): The hon. Lady is making a very important speech. I would like to underline that final fact. It feels very much like the situation with our schools, where the Government tell us that we have more money, but teachers and headteachers tell us that we do not. I would like to underline her crucial point: we have less money to fund health services in 2019-20 than in 2018-19. I hope the Minister will be able to explain why.

Heidi Allen: The hon. Gentleman, who is my neighbour, is absolutely right. Everyone knows that Cambridge and the surrounding region are growing, yet somehow we are expected to manage on less and less money every year.

Let us bring some colour and real life to the situation. The provision of in vitro fertilisation, of any number of cycles, is totally under question. Hearing aids for those with moderate hearing loss, and community diagnostics, such as ultrasound services, might go, as might vasectomies. The CCG has to reduce its spend on services outside of hospitals by £33 million this year. That means, speaking plainly, significant cuts to community care—everything we are trying to do to stop people from being admitted into hospital, which we know is the most expensive form of care. Every single one of our major out-of-hospital care services is under review.

The Minister will be familiar with a CCG’s “distance from target”, which is how far away a CCG is from what the NHS would consider the fair funding position to be. I can tell him that that will deteriorate yet further to 3.71% by 2019-20 from an already unacceptable gap of 3.5% in 2018-19. That position is simply unsustainable. The goalposts are being moved further and further away. In monetary terms, it means that we are underfunded by £43 million this year. If nothing changes, over the next five years we will be underfunded by £200 million. Our CCG has just agreed the 2019-20 financial plan with NHS England. That agreed plan will show a deficit of £192 million. That just cannot continue. I cannot believe for one minute that the Minister would be content with such a depleted health service.

What are the Minister’s views on what he can do specifically to correct the flawed growth forecasting? How will he address our significantly lower funding per capita? Will he tell me why the problems have not been addressed in the five-year funding allocation? I would appreciate a commitment to an early review of the funding allocation and extra intermediate emergency funding. At this rate, we are going to be cutting just about everything. If that funding is not available, I sincerely ask the Minister to explain exactly how my CCG and its providers are expected to close that deficit gap. Without cutting more health services for my constituents in South Cambridgeshire and for people across the whole Cambridgeshire and Peterborough area, I do not see how the CCG can make ends meet.

4.6 pm

The Minister for Health (Stephen Hammond): It is a pleasure, as ever, to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I thank the hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire (Heidi Allen) for bringing forward this debate. I know there are not many Members in the Chamber, but that should not in any way undermine or take away from the importance of this debate, which is clearly of great interest to her. She spoke powerfully about the problems that the CCG has had.

I recognise right at the outset that Cambridgeshire and Peterborough CCG has faced a number of difficult, interlocking and historical factors. The historically low funding settlement is obviously taking time to rise to target—there is a commitment to rise to target over time, which I will come on to in greater depth in a moment—and that has combined, as she rightly points out, with the fast rate of population growth across the area, which has put additional demands on the CCG.

I and the Government recognise that the CCG receives less per person than its neighbouring CCGs. As the hon. Lady rightly pointed out, it gets £119 per person less than its neighbouring CCG in Bedfordshire. Although it is moving towards target—as she rightly points out, it is 3.7% below target this year—that figure reflects some of the historical funding patterns. It does not reflect the allocation formula change that the NHS is working to resolve.

The hon. Lady and the hon. Member for Cambridge (Daniel Zeichner) pointed out the growth levels. She is right that Cambridge and Peterborough have seen substantial population growth in recent years, and that growth has been 0.6% above the England average over the past four years. Inevitably, that growth—plus the potential growth from the Oxford-to-Cambridge expressway, which will put more housing along the corridor—will clearly cause additional pressures.

The hon. Lady asked for a commitment from me. I can say that NHS England is committed to bringing all CCGs up to target as soon as possible, while also ensuring that all CCGs receive some additional funding this year. As a result, the CCG has received an additional 2.5% per capita growth in 2018-19, and will receive a further 5% per capita growth in 2019-20. That will bring the CCG funding up to £1.1 billion for 2019, which is below target but moving up. As I think the hon. Lady said, it was previously some 5% away from the target; it is now 3.7% away from the target. Our commitment is to bring all CCGs up to the target as soon as possible.

The hon. Lady will not be surprised to hear me say that it is, of course, a matter for NHS England to allocate funding to CCGs, and that process has been evolving. It might be helpful if I briefly set out how that happens. NHS England must ensure that funding is equitable and fair, taking into account the three main drivers of healthcare demand: population growth, deprivation and an ageing population. As a point of principle, CCG allocations are based on equal access for equal need and reducing health inequalities.

As the hon. Lady pointed out, a complex national formula supports the allocation of resources, and historically that has caused some distortions. That formula is developed by the Advisory Committee on Resource Allocation, known as ACRA, which is an independent body of experts, supported by the population projections of the Office for National Statistics.

The hon. Lady cited some population predictions, which I think come from the Cambridge Research Office for National Statistics. She will therefore understand that, although I accept that those numbers are shared locally, Ministers and the NHS have to rely on the independent and academically
rigorous body. Otherwise, it could easily be perceived that we were using a local think-tank’s population growth estimates to privilege one group over another.

Heidi Allen: Am I allowed to intervene?

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): Order. You are allowed to rise at any moment, but the Minister does not have to accept your intervention.

Heidi Allen: Thank you, Mr Hollobone. Forgive me—I have not led a Westminster Hall debate before. I accept all that the Minister has said, and it is a difficult matter, but the statistics are flawed. The Minister said that he accepts that the growth is 0.6% above the England average; the Office for National Statistics is working on its being 0.1% below. Something is therefore going a little astray.

Stephen Hammond: I am sorry—either I did not make myself clear, or the hon. Lady misheard me. I said that the population growth was 0.6% above the England average over the last four years. The number that she cited of the growth being below the average is from ONS predictions for the next two or three years.

Heidi Allen: Forgive me if I am mistaken, but I thought I heard the Minister agree that the growth was in fact 0.6% above the England average. If it is, why on earth are we working on the ONS figures that it is 0.1% below the England average?

Stephen Hammond: This is prejudging the tennis season, in that we can go backwards and forwards, but let me say for the record that if I misled the hon. Lady I apologise wholeheartedly. I agreed that the population growth of the Cambridgeshire and Peterborough CCG area has been 0.6% above the England average over the last four years; I did not intend to suggest that it is expected to be 0.6% above the England average for the next one, two or three years. I think the ONS number that she cited is one that we recognise; however, as I said, the numbers that she produced from the Cambridge Research Group are different from those of the ONS.

This year, ACRA has recommended a wide-ranging set of changes to the formula, to ensure fairness across the country. In the case of Cambridgeshire and Peterborough CCG, that has led to an increase in NHS England’s estimate of what the fair share of resources should be. That is mainly due to the mental health and learning disability service estimate and the market forces factor.

Changes have also been made to the way population data is used. ACRA now uses the annual average registered list for the most recent year, rather than the size of the list at the time of allocations, to allocate resources on a per capita basis. That change will inevitably benefit Cambridgeshire and Peterborough CCG because it will reflect more recent population growth. The change is obviously also intended better to reflect cyclical patterns in areas with large numbers of seasonal workers or large student populations.

ACRA also now uses specific data regarding age and gender population projections produced by the ONS, so that if population growth in an area is disproportionately in a younger or older population, which will obviously affect the relative need, that will now be reflected in the new way that NHS England calculates the allocations.

As I said earlier, the formula changes will more accurately reflect population growth, deprivation and the structure of the population over the next few years.

Heidi Allen: I appreciate the sincerity, and my CCG knows that NHS England intends to improve the formula to make it more representative. However, a question remains, and it is the same question that the hon. Member for Cambridge (Daniel Zeichner) referred to regarding education: what happens in the meantime? Our CCG is talking about significantly cutting community services. That will affect elderly care in the community. It may take IVF treatment away altogether, as we are at just one round at the moment. Although I appreciate that NHS England is an enormous machine and improving the health formula will take some time, what do I say to my constituents whose health services are being cut while we wait?

Stephen Hammond: I will say two things to the hon. Lady. First, the reflection of the formula and the increase in the money is coming through this year and next year. We have spoken about the additional per capita funding that is coming through.

Daniel Zeichner: There is a complicated set of issues surrounding national health service funding, but the CCG is telling us that it will have less money to spend in 2019-20 than in 2018-19. I really just want confirmation from the Minister that that is his understanding too.

Stephen Hammond: All I have are the percentage increases in additional per capita funding for 2018-19 and 2019-20. I will seek inspiration to confirm the absolute totals, and if that inspiration reaches me while I am still on my feet, obviously I will relay it to the hon. Gentleman. If not, I am happy to confirm that I will write to him.

My point is that the NHS England allocation is based on the ACRA assessment and on the change in the funding formula. The hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire and the hon. Member for Cambridge rightly point out that, historically, the funding of their CCG has not been equivalent to that of local areas. That historical funding disparity is being improved, and it is moving back towards the target of funding for CCGs over the next two or three years. I pointed out that last year there was a funding increase of 2.7%, and there will be one of more than 5% this year.

Heidi Allen: While the Minister’s inspiration is working diligently on the back row behind him, may I ask to be included in that? If we do not have time now, perhaps the Minister could come back to us. He is right that some additional funding has been provided to the CCG, but more than that amount is in mandated national programmes over which it has no control, so how much extra will the CCG receive for core services—not for something that has been put on it from a national point of view?

Stephen Hammond: The hon. Lady will know that some of those core mandated services are providing core services as well. I am happy for the hon. Member for Cambridge to correct me, but my understanding is that an additional £8.5 million will go into the CCG. If he wishes to write to me with his figures, I will happily source those numbers for him. However, I have just received inspiration from somewhere, for which I am very grateful, and I can confirm that that is the number.
Daniel Zeichner: We could probably swap numbers for the remaining 11 minutes of the debate, but I am told that the CCG has additional nationally mandated commitments that exceed the extra money that it is getting, which is the nub of the problem. The overall problem, however, is that the Prime Minister has been going around telling people that a huge amount of money is coming into the national health service, but locally it appears that we have less. That is obviously difficult for local people to understand.

Stephen Hammond: The Prime Minister has rightly been telling people that there is a huge commitment to put more money into the NHS. Throughout the debate, I have recognised that the moneys that the CCG historically received were below the target for CCGs. I have stated that more money is now coming into the CCG and that NHS England is committed to moving all CCGs to target. Although he may say that is a historical issue, I hope he would also recognise the fact that the Government are putting more money into the national health service and that that money is coming to his area.

That brings me to the point I wanted to make about wider funding. The Government are making a commitment and backing the NHS with an extra £20 billion a year by 2023, which will be reflected in the resources available to CCGs.

Daniel Zeichner: I note, however, that my reading of what is happening to the CCG is that it has already spent a lot of the money that is coming through, so it will mean not more money, but dealing with past debt. Again, could the Minister confirm that that is in fact the case?

Stephen Hammond: That will partially be a decision for the CCG. I do not recognise exactly what the hon. Gentleman has said; I have said that an additional amount of money is going in. I accept that there are nationally mandated core services that need to be provided by the CCG. I stress again, as I have throughout the debate, that I accept that the CCG has historically been underfunded against population growth and against other local CCGs, as he and the hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire have pointed out.

I have reflected in my remarks that the change in the formula will allow the population growth that has happened in the previous four years to be more accurately reflected. If the hon. Lady’s growth projections prove more accurate than those of the ONS, I have indicated how, through the formula change, that will come through more quickly in the funding that is received by the CCG. Those are the key points. I am happy to write to her and the hon. Member for Cambridge to confirm the financial position as I and the Department understand it, so we are clear. We could spend another joyous eight minutes swapping numbers, but perhaps we will not do that now.

Suffice it to say that the long-term plan also sets out how the NHS will use those resources more effectively. It is clear that there is a huge increase in the commitment to primary care and that the formula change will reflect that more accurately for CCGs. I have no doubt that, if the formula increase does not come through in the way that the hon. Gentleman and the hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire expect, or that I expect, they will continue to make the case to me and will bring me back for another debate. I thank the hon. Lady for securing the debate and I hope she agrees that we have discussed the funding formula.

Question put and agreed to.
House Building Targets

4.24 pm

Anne Marie Morris (Newton Abbot) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered house building targets.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I am grateful to have been granted this important debate. I do not think anyone in the Chamber will disagree that we need more houses; I suspect that there is clearly a role for targets to ensure that we build more such homes, but they need to be the right targets followed by the right incentives and disincentives to ensure that we get the right behaviour.

The main house building target with which we are all familiar is the numbers target set by central Government. The National Audit Office has looked at that number and it is not entirely clear that it is valid. I am sure that the Minister will respond with exactly why that figure has been picked and whether he agrees with the NAO’s conclusions.

There is a similar challenge with the local government number, which is generally based on each 10-year census, the last of which was in 2014. There is room for some flexibility around affordability, but that is about it. In the same way, then, those local government targets also need to be properly validated, and we need evidence, so it would be appropriate for local authorities to be required to collect more information about that housing need and to look at brownfield sites and empty properties that are not being used.

Local authorities also need to be given more flexibility and enforcement power to bring uninhabitable sites into habitable use. Although, clearly, there are powers, the challenge is that most local authorities choose not to use them, because they do not have the finances or resources for a long, drawn-out process. That is not the right approach, however, and we need to consider how to make it simpler and easier for local authorities to use their powers. The real need has to be established, not just estimated.

If we are to look at the totality of the housing we need, we must also consider the challenge of land banking. Local authorities need new powers to prevent that behaviour. We could do that in a number of ways, such as by looking at the rules that allow a developer to comply with the legislation enforced at the time he purchased, not the time he develops, when it is often more stringent. One small thing would be to say, “You must comply with the rules as they are today.” We could also consider some form of compulsory notice, or, in extremis, compulsory purchase, to make sure that those plots of land are brought into supply.

The targets based largely on numbers are not enough. There are probably four areas that we need to look at, for which there are some targets and plans that are, however, not strong enough. Those four areas are affordability, environmental impact, infrastructure and community benefit. On affordability, I do not think that any hon. Member present disagrees that 80% of the market frankly does not represent anything affordable. The problem is that the link is with the market price of the house, not the average salary, I appreciate that if we make that link, there will be a huge funding gap that will have to be met from somewhere; I will come on to how I might do that in a minute.

We need new national and local targets for affordability, and we need to ensure that they cannot be diluted. Many developers, having said that they will develop x% in accordance with the local council’s rules and regulations, come back and say, “Oh dear, I cannot develop that number of affordable homes. They must all be executive homes”, and because the council is so needy of the community infrastructure levy and the new homes bonus, by and large, it caves in. That cannot be right.

Siobhain McDonagh (Mitcham and Morden) (Lab): The hon. Lady is making a very interesting speech. On the point about whether a developer can develop the proportion of social housing units, does she agree that developers should be required to publicly produce their affordability assessments in order that we can all have a look at those figures?

Anne Marie Morris: That sounds to me like an excellent proposition—I agree.

With absolutely the best interests at heart, the Government have introduced very good schemes, such as Help to Buy and so on, and I believe there are more on the way, but the challenge we have is that if a local authority complies and creates enough housing stock as part of those schemes, that squeezes the amount that can be available for truly affordable housing. Where I am in Devon, that has been a huge challenge for Teignbridge District Council. Once the percentages of affordable homes are agreed, they should be pretty much immovable, except in extremis. It should not be in the gift of the developer to change that.

How are we going to pay for all of this? I think we all accept that the fundamental link between salaries and the cost of a property has been broken and needs to be fixed. We need to look at how to share more fairly the benefit and the burden of the windfall that comes, first, as a chunk taken by the owner and, secondly, as a chunk taken by the developer. How might we do that?

Owners already pay a tax, so they do have to make some contribution. In addition, they should be required to set aside a fund for infrastructure provision, which is one of the biggest challenges for any housing development. That would be important. That money should be provided up front.

At the moment, the owner getting paid generally depends on the developer getting planning permission. It should be conditional not just on that but on the delivery of the infrastructure and, potentially, the affordable housing. There has to be some way of tying the owner to a greater responsibility for delivering the homes.

What can we do with regard to the developer? The developer is generally already required to make a contribution to the infrastructure, but, by and large, it is not an up-front contribution. We need to make changes so that it is. We need to look at putting infrastructure in place before we build even one house. There will be some occasions when, for practical reasons, the houses have to be built before the roads are, but the principle is important.
[Anne Marie Morris]

We then need to ensure that the developer is held to account on developing the types of homes that the council needs. Whether an area needs flats or two-bedroom homes or three-bedroom homes, or whatever, will be in the council’s local plan, with more information in the neighbourhood plan. Often, the developer brings an argument that they cannot provide what is required—that they need to provide executive homes, because that is all they can afford to produce. That is not the right answer. The council ought to have the power to ensure that, when it grants planning permission, it is to provide the houses or flats that we actually need. There might be a question about whether a developer would then continue to develop. If that were a national policy, rule or regulation, they would continue to develop, on the assumption that they want to stay in business.

What about the council? In this whole process, they do not have the relevant power or resource. By and large, they cannot say to a developer, “No, you are not providing the sort of houses we need.” They need the CIL money, they need the new homes bonus and they know that if they lose an appeal brought by a developer, they will have to pay the costs. That rule needs to be changed. Councils need to be free not to give planning permission where they feel it appropriate, without having over their heads the real burden of paying fees if they are then proved wrong.

On brownfield sites and empty properties, councils need to be given the power to enforce. That means ensuring that they are properly funded to do so and that the legislation has the teeth to make that happen. Without that, those who own brownfield sites or have vacant properties will not be willing to do much about them.

I want to touch on the environmental impact. This is a huge issue; it has had a significant impact in my constituency. There is a much fought-over development in Newton Abbot, called NA3. It is currently being reviewed by the Government, because the local authority did not make a decision in sufficient time. The developer has effectively said that they want it to be looked at in more detail, and that process is ongoing as we speak. I will not refer to the details exactly, as the matter is currently in train, but the way the system works means that no account has been taken of the real number of houses we need, nor of the real value of that particular piece of land, which offers much in environmental support and opportunity for the area as a whole.

Another example is Kingsteignton, one of the smallest towns in the country. It started out as a very small village and just got developed and developed. The character of that village has largely been destroyed and it has become a small commuter town—a dormitory suburb of Exeter. It was never developed to be a town, so there is no physical centre such as a cluster of shops that people can go to, to give a heart to that community.

There are a number of things that might be done to address these issues. I start with carbon impact, which is slightly dislocated from my previous point. There used to be carbon impact targets. As I understand it—the Minister may correct me—they were abolished in 2014 or 2015. It seems to me that everyone feels very strongly, and rightly so, that if we are to do our bit, we need to ensure that new housing is developed with the lowest carbon impact possible. That is not the case at the moment. Many constituents say to me, “Why are solar panels not mandated nowadays on new developments?”

Not to mandate them on industrial developments certainly seems to me to be madness. That needs to be re-examined, and I hope that with the new focus on environmental matters, the Government will do that.

If the Government are really serious about trying to ensure that there are beneficial rather than adverse environmental impacts, they need to look at investing in and supporting investment in new technology to enable us to build new, high-quality, environmentally friendly houses and homes.

My other concern is about the green lungs. In communities that have been further built out, we have tried to retain small areas of parkland and so on, so that people feel the area is a home, and they have somewhere they can take their children and their dogs and so on. In a large conurbation like London, that is difficult, and we are where we are, but there needs to be a greater focus in planning on retaining the green lungs going forwards. I am concerned that we now seem to be continually reducing the footprint that a property has, and reducing the amount of land/garden. Mental health is also a big issue today, and greenness and space are very important to mental health. The link between planning, housing and mental health does not need me to prove it. It is already there for all to see.

The Government should be looking at a new strategy. Alongside looking to develop new towns—I know there are some already—they should be looking at new villages. I appreciate the appeal of new towns with their greater population, but our villages are one of the beautiful things about our green England, and Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. Why is it that we cannot have a new villages strategy? They might be the template for environmental pilots. If the Minister in any way accepts any of that, the national policy planning framework will need to be reviewed and fundamentally overhauled.

Let me now look at the issue of infrastructure. I have talked a bit about the funding and when the money comes forward, but I am still amazed that, although there is an obligation to put in a telephone line and connect to water and electricity, there is no obligation—unless the Minister says it has changed—to put in broadband. It seems to me that planning should not be given unless the developer makes a commitment to put in broadband, by which I mean a broadband connection to BT—not because I love BT, but because it provides the physical infrastructure. In some areas where in theory there has been a commitment to provide broadband, it has been access to Virgin or one of the other suppliers. As they do not have control over the physical network and infrastructure, the reality is that the community cannot get broadband. I am hopeful that the Minister is looking at some of the challenges.

Infrastructure is not just about electricity or broadband but about having enough schools and health provision. One of the things that has continued to surprise me is that some very important consultees are not statutory consultees. One of those is health. Although the Minister’s predecessor would say to me, “But they can be consulted, and usually they are,” my response has always been, “Well, that’s true, Minister, but the reality is that if there is no statutory obligation to do it thoroughly and properly, you will probably not do it to the degree that it needs to be done.” I am certainly aware that there are
many areas in my part of Devon where we do not have adequate provision for health services, which is a real issue.

Part of the infrastructure is normally funded through the council. One of the things that has been a barrier to councils is their inability to borrow against future receipts of CIL moneys or the new homes bonus. If we could change that—at one point, one of the Minister’s predecessors started looking at it—it would make a significant difference. Although the CIL and NHB moneys go to the council, there is no obligation for them to use that money in the local area where the development takes place. I appreciate that where there is a neighbourhood plan—I am certainly a great fan of them—it is a win-win for that neighbourhood, because they get an element of the money to use in their own area. Although that is a good start, I do not believe that it is adequate.

Let me now turn to the final area where I think we should have different thinking, new targets and a new approach: the community. How does the community benefit from all this? Looking back in history, the concept of planning and planning approval was introduced because it was believed that landowners had too much power to build anywhere—rightly so, because they own the land—and it was therefore thought more appropriate for there to be some control, hence the planning process.

It seems that there is a stakeholder missing from this agenda: the community. I have talked about providing homes and ensuring that we have stable and mentally healthy communities, but we will not do that unless the community is involved. I know that there is a requirement in the NPPF to look at environmental and community issues, but there are no real teeth to it. It seems that the concept of community interest is very limited and needs to be reviewed. At the moment, we generally look at the impact of any plan put forward on productivity—rightly so—but we do not look at the impact of that development on the community’s quality of life, which is important. If we are so focused on the need for healthy communities and on reducing our mental health issues, that is critical. If we are to achieve this, the NPPF will need to be changed.

In trying to put the community at the heart of all this, we need to look at a viable villages initiative. I have referred to the issue before. One of the challenges is that most of the large developers will not develop small villages. The small developers find it more expensive for them to do it, and the impact of any plan put forward on productivity—rightly so—but we do not look at the impact of that development on the community’s quality of life, which is important. If we are so focused on the need for healthy communities and on reducing our mental health issues, that is critical. If we are to achieve this, the NPPF will need to be changed.

I have an old chestnut: engagement with the community. I have raised this with just about every Minister who preceded the current Minister, whom I shall also ask to consider it. For all the reasons I have expressed, I believe that the community should have a right of appeal in the planning process. The Minister’s predecessors have always said to me, “You can’t, because you’ll create a nimby world where anybody who doesn’t like something simply puts up their hand.” I would say no. Indeed, a piece by the National Federation of Builders that was based on an article I wrote said, “You can’t do this.” I am sure its concern was that, should we get the community involved in nimbyism, it would simply block development.

If we were to manage the process properly and say that only a town or parish council could appeal, and if appeals had to be made on planning grounds, it would minimise the room for manoeuvre and for nimbyism to creep in. I recommend to the Minister that he look at this again. The intention is not to take power away from district councils; it is to get a better, joined-up system that works for communities, councils, central Government and all of us who want more houses in the right places. We want communities, not just blocks of flats.

I thank the Minister for his patience. Owing to the actions of a number of Governments over the years, our planning system is now broken. Although I commend the Minister’s predecessors for working hard to change that—much of what went into the NPPF and the new plans was good—it remains broken. It cannot just be a numbers game, which is what we focus on now. The system must take into account some of the other issues that have been raised. We have to look at how we will link house prices to wages, and I have made some proposals on how we do that. We absolutely need to address this key issue, so that people on average wages in Devon can actually afford to buy a house in a sensible timeframe, rather than having to rely on the bank of mum and dad and/or wait until they are 40. As Maslow said in his hierarchy of needs, a home is the most important thing for human survival.

It seems to me that the community must and should have a voice. I hope that the Minister will take my suggestions, and that he will look at them and digest them. I very much hope that he will stand up and say that many of these are good ideas. Indeed, it would be even better if the Minister were able to tell me that the present Government were already looking at them. I shall now sit down and look forward to hearing the Minister’s and other contributors’ thoughts on this very thorny issue.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): Order. The debate can last until 5.30 pm. I am obliged to call the Front Benchers no later than 5.7 pm. The guideline limits are five minutes for the SNP, five minutes for Her Majesty’s Opposition and 10 minutes for the Minister, and then Mr Hollobone. I want to focus my remarks on land banking. Hull is a growing, successful city that is attracting significant investment and undergoing positive change. The council has already granted numerous housing, commercial, industrial and educational permissions, the majority of which have been implemented.
Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): In my hon. Friend’s constituency, Goodwin Community Housing is a great example of brownfield sites being used to build modern, modular, low-carbon housing. Does she agree that we need to see that model of housing develop if we are to meet our housing targets using brownfield sites?

Emma Hardy: I completely agree, and I look forward to going to see those properties on Friday.

We have a problem with landlords not implementing their permissions in full, and with one landowner in particular. The problem is not just that sites are not being developed, but that landlords are failing to manage their responsibilities for them. There are patches of land across the city—I will talk about the details in a moment—that are being left to go to ruin, and landlords are not taking full responsibility for health and safety.

The Lord Line building is a site of personal significance to the people of Hull, as it is one of the last buildings relating to Hull’s fishing heritage. It is the site of the dock where the fishing boats used to come in and out of when we were the capital city of the UK for the fishing trade, but it has been left to go to ruin. Youths go in there for reasons that I do not want to elaborate on here. We can see from the discarded needles, the bricks thrown from the top of the building, and the fire engines that attend the site regularly that it is not being properly safeguarded or protected. There will end up being a tragedy there, because people keep going to that building and it is not being looked after.

The owner of that land also owned the former Rank Hovis Clarence Mill on St Peter Street. They pledged to clear the building and promised a Radisson Blu hotel in its place. The demolition and clearing work still had not started by 2015, and in 2017 the permission expired and was not renewed. They bought the Heaven & Hell nightclub in March 2011. They said that they were going to put a £15 million development called Manor Cube on the site, and stated that the building work on the hotel would be completed by July 2013, but by that time no work had been completed.

The Lord Line building has been left to go to rack and ruin, causing great upset in the fishing community in Hull. The company—Manor Properties—seems to have a habit of promising pie-in-the-sky, wonderful, big dreams to the people of Hull, while letting the areas go to ruin.

There are a few points where I feel the Minister can tighten up the existing legislation to prevent this from happening again. We could have enhanced compulsory purchase orders where a site is allocated and consent is not implemented in full. Those powers could enable the local authority to acquire the site at 50% of its market value, provided that it commences development within 12 months of acquisition and at least 50% of the development is completed within three years. I know that the council would develop that land, but it does not have the power to purchase it. If a section 15 notice has to be served due to a lack of maintenance and dereliction on a site, allowing it to be acquired at 40% of its market value could also help the development.

The Minister should also focus public sector funding on unlocking those sites by providing additional grants and loans. The rules are set up to prevent the council from being able to compulsorily purchase the sites, but when people come into my city on the A63, they see this abandoned building on the way in. That is not the advertisement that I want for my city. People walking around the centre see patches of land that have been left or underdeveloped. The Minister could change that by just tightening up a few bits of legislation.

Removing VAT for any conversion works undertaken to properties’ heritage action zones would also help us. The Minister should change the rules about what constitutes a material start, to prevent landowners from undertaking minor works.

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): Order.

Emma Hardy: I will write to the Minister with more information.

4.54 pm

John Howell (Henley) (Con): When I first came to the House in 2008, I began work on a paper called “Open Source Planning”, which set out an important distinction and led to the abolition of the top-down targets that had existed under the Labour Government. It took a little while to get rid of them, but we have not replaced them. The Chancellor’s target of 300,000 houses is an aspirational or soft target, because it cannot be achieved on its own without consequential changes to the planning system. We have already made a large number of changes, and there are more on the way.

The main target that we should be aiming for is one based on housing need. Under previous Administrations, it was left to individual councils to come up with the figure for housing need and methodology to calculate it. That was incredibly expensive for councils and led to an enormous number of court cases, as developers challenged them. I was very pleased when the Government asked me to sit on the Local Plans Expert Group and come up with a new methodology. We were the first to introduce a methodology based on Office for National Statistics figures. Although there are some problems with it, which I am sure the Minister is aware of, it is a very useful starting point.

Unfortunately, many other deals—for example, growth deals—have subsequently come into play and overridden those figures. The councils concerned have come up with other figures to replace the need figure that is based on, for example, strategic housing market assessment surveys that are quite old. We and councils must have an overriding desire to go back and take those figures out to the public to discuss what is being done and ensure that there is public buy-in.

My hon. Friend the Member for Newton Abbot (Anne Marie Morris) mentioned the NPPF. I am very pleased to have been involved in the original version of it. All we tried to do with it was to boil it down from thousands of pages to 50 to make it accessible to everyone.

The best targets are those in neighbourhood plans. They have been developed by the community, and the figures from the district council that they have been built on are merely the minimum figures. The community can add to them whenever it wishes. Neighbourhood plans are very good at protecting the open and green spaces that the community wishes to include. There is a great need to protect the people who spend a couple of years producing a neighbourhood plan, which is why
I introduced a private Member’s Bill to take away the right of appeal if a developer has definitely gone against a neighbourhood plan.

I do not think the system is broken. We have gone out of our way to try to fix it. I would point to the fact that the viability calculations that developers have to produce are public. They are available and have to be discussed, and local councils should have access to them. I agree with what my hon. Friend said about carbon impact, but I believe—

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): Order.

4.59 pm

Siobhain McDonagh (Mitcham and Morden) (Lab):
Thank you, Mr Hollobone; it is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship. I congratulate the hon. Member for Newton Abbot (Anne Marie Morris) on securing this particularly important debate.

Since 2010, housebuilding has fallen to its lowest level since the 1920s. Rough sleeping has risen every year, rents have shot up faster than incomes, there are almost 200,000 fewer homeowners and new affordable housebuilding is at a 24-year low. Meanwhile, average house prices are at a record high of almost eight times the average income, yet we wonder why home ownership is at its lowest level in Britain since 1985.

In reality, although 1.2 million people are on housing waiting lists across our country, this Government delivered just 6,464 social homes in 2017-18. That is simply diabolical when compared with the 150,000 social homes delivered every year in the mid-1960s. The evidence is clear: it has been done before and can be done again.

The housing crisis is about the reality behind those statistics. I am tired of the endless reports, countless debates, fruitless words and lack of action. The Government have a housing building target of 300,000 new homes per year, but they simply cannot keep willing the completion of more homes without finding the means to provide them. Here are some of those means.

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): Order.

Siobhain McDonagh (Mitcham and Morden) (Lab):

Fourthly, why are the Government not introducing more punitive action for the 200,000 homes currently lying empty across our country? Fifthly, how about increasing the surcharge for the 10% of people who own a second property before so many even own their first? Sixthly, the Government should introduce punitive or preventive action for land bankers. After all, if the Government started unlocking their own land bank, the private sector would rush to follow.

Seventhly, what about reducing the proportion needed to buy into shared ownership, from 25% to 5%? Eighthly, could the Government not incentivise more building of specialised accommodation for the elderly, thereby releasing some of the current housing stock? Ninthly, it is time to prioritise locally, especially in the capital. Londoners should have first option on local properties before they are sold off internationally and are likely to remain empty.

Finally, how about directing pension funds into residential investment? As my hon. Friend the Member for Croydon Central (Sarah Jones) will know, Legal & General bought 167 homes in Croydon and leased them back to the local council over 40 years, for homeless families. Those are just some suggestions. In the name of all the families who we see every week at our advice surgeries, let’s get building!

5.3 pm

Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): I am delighted to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I thank the hon. Member for Newton Abbot (Anne Marie Morris) for introducing the debate. The Minister will no doubt know what I am going to talk about because we have talked about it privately, but I will put it on the public record. He has been very helpful in his response, but I hope that he will be a little more helpful.

Stroud District Council wants to build more affordable houses and is prepared to accept a bigger housing number overall. It is particularly proud of its reputation for social housing. The problem is that, as it currently stands, the methodology makes it difficult for us to meet the numbers that we are now required to meet, which are well above the numbers in the plan that we negotiated a few years ago.

The current methodology starts with the average level of household growth projected over 10 years, which it then adjusts based on a relative balance between median house prices and earnings, with a larger adjustment for areas with higher ratios. It then caps the level of adjustment to 40% above the housing requirements adopted in the post-national planning policy framework local plans. That sounds a bit like gobbledegook, but it basically means that, in the case of Stroud in Gloucestershire, we now face an increase on our local plan from 448 a year up to 635 a year, which is a 39.3% increase. Tewkesbury and the Forest of Dean also face large increases but, quite bizarrely, Gloucester and Cheltenham face a decrease. They have always been somewhat in parallel with Stroud, so it seems bizarre that we have come up with a methodology that affects us in that way.

One thing that the Minister could look at is the five-year migration flow, which seems to make a dramatic difference. We accept the uplift in terms of the household projections because we have a larger population, but the affordability ratio has taken us from 503 to 635 a year, and that matters, because that makes things more difficult,
People want to live in the communities to which their home is central to a fairer and more prosperous society.

There is also the issue—as the Minister knows well—of the viability assessment. I went to a meeting of the all-party parliamentary group for housing and planning. I was pleased to hear the Minister’s officials say that they are looking carefully at that and intend to make it much more transparent, including publishing section 106s, which would be a very good thing, because we have always had our suspicions about what happens to those behind the scenes.

The additional problem is that we are still included within the same rent allowance area as Gloucester, which means that, because rents are higher in Stroud, people are faced with a top-up. I know that the Minister will not have the chance in this short debate, but I would appreciate it if he looked carefully at disaggregating rent level areas again, because otherwise it makes it punitive for those who want to rent in Stroud but cannot afford to pay the top-up.

In conclusion, we need to produce more housing. Everyone is pushing the Minister towards more housing. The Government have the laudable aim of building between 270,000 and 300,000 new homes. We will do our part in Stroud, but we cannot rely just on the larger sites. We have two bids in for the garden communities—I do not know if the Minister will address where those bids have gone to—but I suspect that we do not have the capability or the capacity to deliver one of them, let alone both, because of the numbers required.

My plea to the Minister is to look at how the calculation has been arrived at, to give us more realism, so that we can plan our part but do not end up with a huge shortfall, which will end up being hammered at the next local plan stage. That would seem unfair, given that we have tended to meet our level of housing in the past and would like to do so in future.

5.8 pm

Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I am grateful to the hon. Member for Newton Abbot (Anne Marie Morris) for introducing this debate. She covered a range of issues and challenges, including mental health, the environment and local infrastructure.

We also heard from the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle (Emma Hardy), who covered the issue of land banking. The hon. Member for Henley (John Howell) covered housing need and a change to a methodology based on ONS figures. The hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh) covered a range of issues, including the cost of housing and average wages, and a whole range of ideas for how we can build more houses. Her key message was “Let’s get building”, with which I wholeheartedly agree. The hon. Member for Stroud (Dr Drew) also raised issues with the current methodology and the need to provide more housing. I think we can all agree, no matter where we are in the country, that we need more houses.

Ensuring that everyone has a safe, warm and affordable home is central to a fairer and more prosperous society. People want to live in the communities to which they are affiliated or that offer employment, which often means that they might not want to live in a nearby town a few miles down the road.

Housing and planning are both devolved to Scotland. Sometimes in these debates, I feel like an international observer, but today so much is in common that there is a lot there and perhaps a few things that we can all learn from one another. In Scotland, the SNP is on track to deliver an ambitious target of 50,000 affordable homes in the lifetime of the current Scottish Parliament—which will expire in 2021—backed by a £3.3 billion investment. It is incredible to remember that when the SNP came to power in Scotland, the previous Administration had built just six council houses across the entire country.

By contrast, under the SNP, 20,255 new build homes had been completed across all sectors in the year ending in December 2018, which is an increase of 15%, or 2,669 homes, on the previous year. In the year to the end of March 2019—these figures only came out today, so I had to rewrite my script rapidly this morning at short notice—there were 1,413 council house completions. The total number of social sector completions, including housing associations, was 5,582, which is a 22% increase on the previous year. We need to build far more, but we are going in the right direction and a lot of lessons can be learned from that. The latest statistics show that the Scottish Government have now delivered almost 90,000 affordable homes since 2007. In the year to the end of March 2019, affordable housing supply completions totalled 9,535, up 12%, with 11,130 affordable housing approvals over the same period. We are going the right way.

The Scottish Government are providing more than £756 million for affordable housing this year, and that will increase by £70 million next year. Councils have been given long-term planning assumptions to March 2021. The Scottish Government will continue to lead the way on affordable housing supply in Scotland. In the four years to 2018, 50% more affordable housing units per head of population have been delivered than in England. That is something that we can be proud of, although we still need to build far more houses.

The Scottish Government are taking a range of other actions to bring empty properties back into use. This is an important area. I was shocked to read about the number of long-term empty homes in England, which is now estimated to be more than 216,000. Estimates put the figure in Scotland at about 37,000, but those figures are from different sources so I cannot compare them directly. The SNP supports the Scottish Empty Homes Partnership and a network of dedicated empty homes officers across Scotland. Since 2010, the partnership has been instrumental in bringing more than 2,800 empty homes back into use. There is obviously far more we can do and we are committed to that programme, so we will double support for the partnership from £212,500 in 2018 to more than £400,000 in 2021. We can all learn a lot from one another’s practice in housing.

5.12 pm

Sarah Jones (Croydon Central) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone.

I welcome the debate and congratulate the hon. Member for Newton Abbot (Anne Marie Morris) on securing it and on saying a lot of sensible things on which a lot of us can agree. I would like to say a big thank you to the
hon. Member for Henley (John Howell) for managing
to reduce the quantity of reading on the NPPE that the
rest of us have to do. Even though the Opposition think
that we can beat it up, we certainly want fewer pages
and less red tape. I congratulate my hon. Friend the
Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh)
on her barnstorming 10-point plan for housing, which
would provide the homes we need and was powerful to
hear.

There is much agreement in the Chamber. We are not
building enough homes, those that we do build are not
often affordable, the right infrastructure is not necessarily
in place and no single policy can solve that. We have big
structural problems with our housing system, caused by
years of Government neglect and market failure.

As my hon. Friend said, we have to remember what
we are doing this for. Rough sleeping has more than
doubled since 2010, 120,000 children are in temporary
accommodation, home ownership is down, with 1 million
fewer young home-owning households than in 2010,
and we have an insecure private rented sector. In the
private rented sector, homes are often in poor condition
and 1.3 million children live in poverty. About a quarter
of those children would not be in poverty if they had
access to social housing. The cost of private rents is
driving families into poverty.

The record on house building since 2010 has contributed
to the crisis. House building is still well below the levels
needed, and it has not recovered to where it was before
the global financial crisis. Half of local authorities are
set to miss their targets for new homes, while developers
get away with paying less for infrastructure. House
prices and developer profits have been inflated artificially
by Help to Buy, while the supply of genuinely affordable
homes has plummeted. The past two years have seen the
lowest levels of homes for social rent built since the
second world war—as my hon. Friend said, about
6,500 socially rented homes.

There have been flaws in how the Government have
managed house building targets and in their approach
to planning more broadly. As the hon. Member for
Newton Abbot said, the methodology for calculating
local house building targets is flawed, and the National
Audit Office confirmed that the system is not working
well. The NAO also noted that reducing the target for
certain regions could hamper local authority plans to
regenerate and to stimulate economic growth.

Too often, councils are losing their grip over planning
policy. Too many are still without the up-to-date local
plan and five-year land supply that they need to avoid
developers overruling them and building the wrong
types of homes. The gap between homes granted planning
permission and homes built is at its widest on record
and, as my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon
Hull West and Hessle (Emma Hardy) said, land banking
is a huge problem that we need to tackle. After years of
cuts to local authority funding, many councils simply
do not have the capacity and the expertise to negotiate
effectively with developers to deliver the homes we
need. Local authority spending on planning and
development has halved since 2010, and the NAO has
questioned whether councils have the necessary commercial
skills.

Labour’s approach to house building is fundamentally
different. We believe we should be more ambitious, not
less. We need more homes, which need to be genuinely
affordable. As the hon. Member for Newton Abbot
said, we need to define in some way what we mean by
“affordable”. Labour would redefine in legislation what
“affordable” is, linking it to earnings as well as house
prices. Our green paper on affordable housing, “Housing
for the Many”, sets out our plans to build 1 million
genuinely affordable homes over 10 years, including the
biggest council house building programme in nearly
40 years. We must return councils to their rightful place
as major builders of homes, and we have been clear that
we would restore the national grant investment to the
£4 billion a year it was at the end of the last Labour
Government.

Our campaigning has had some wins. We are glad
that the Government agreed to lift the housing revenue
account cap and to close the viability loophole, which
gave developers a get-out clause on affordable housing.
However, the decision to back Labour and lift the cap
on council borrowing to build council homes means
little if Ministers will not suspend the right to buy,
support the half of councils without a housing revenue
account to set one up, or provide much more central
Government funding to councils.

I look forward to the Minister’s response to the
debate. Will he push for a major building programme of
affordable housing as part of the next spending review,
set new affordable housing targets and respond to Labour’s
call for new powers to end land banking through housing
delivery contracts?

5.17 pm

The Minister for Housing (Kit Malthouse): It is
a great pleasure, as always, to appear under your accurate
and well controlled chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. A
number of Members have raised myriad issues, literally
two or three dozen different, particular and technical
ones, which my team will attempt to respond to in
writing. I will cover some of the major ones.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Newent
Abbot (Anne Marie Morris) on securing this important
debate. House building is at the heart of so much of
Government priority at the moment and has been a big
part of my life over the past 12 months or so. We
will see how much longer that lasts. A number of
specific situations have been raised by Members, but I
hope that they appreciate my position in the planning
system and the quasi-judicial position of the
Secretary of State. It would be inappropriate for me to
call for new powers to land banking through housing
delivery contracts?

Before I do that, I will say that I have found over the
past 12 months a slightly debilitating attitude in some
of our debates, which speaks of the problems we have
in the housing market—there are certainly ones that
need to be addressed—as if they suddenly arrived in
2010 and there had not been a general failure of
Governments over a number of decades to build the
houses that we need. Under the last Labour Government,
the peak in house building was 223,000 a year. We hit
broadly the same figure last year, after 10 years of
recovery in a housing market that had been decimated
in the financial crash. An inability and unwillingness
to acknowledge that does a disservice to the general
public. Presenting a series of silver bullet solutions to
a very complicated and difficult problem does not
illustrate to the public that all parties across the House are joined shoulder to shoulder to build the homes that the next generation needs.

I am pleased that there is general cross-party agreement that a target of 300,000 homes or thereabouts—1 million homes over 10 years, which is about 100,000—

Sarah Jones: Affordable homes.

Kit Malthouse: Affordable homes as well. That is critical. It would be helpful if, from time to time, the hon. Member for Croydon Central (Sarah Jones) acknowledged, as she did in the latter part of her speech, some of the things that the Government have done to get us towards 222,000 homes and to move beyond that in the months to come.

On the major subject of the debate, local housing need, we introduced a standardised approach to assessing housing need locally, as my hon. Friend the Member for Henley (John Howell) mentioned. We published that in July last year in the national planning policy framework, after extensive consultation to speed up and reduce the cost of plan making, to make that process more transparent and accessible.

In practice, all councils should make a realistic assessment of the number of homes that their communities need and they should use the standard method as the starting point, not the end point in the process. That starting point is used to identify the minimum number of homes needed every year. What the standard method does not do, however, is provide a maximum number of homes needed, nor does it provide a target that must be planned for. Development should not progress at any cost, and local circumstances should be taken into account. We need to make sure that constraints are considered and that we find the right places for homes, having regard to those constraints.

We need to ensure that the right infrastructure is in place, as my hon. Friend the Member for Newton Abbot, and that we underpin all development with good design principles. Local authorities are best placed to do that; through the production of development plans they should set out how to meet the needs of their communities. It is vital that local authorities plan sustainable communities, as my hon. Friend also mentioned, delivering homes that people want to live in. As part of that, we need the right types of infrastructure ready to support the delivery of new homes. Identifying the infrastructure needed to support growth will be an important aspect of local plan making. It is only by identifying what is required that it can be planned for and delivered.

To support that delivery, we are providing grants to local areas. Through the £5.5 billion housing infrastructure fund, we will help to deliver the infrastructure that is needed. I am pleased that Teignbridge District Council will benefit from the fund, having successfully bid for £4.9 million of marginal viability funding, to unlock 315 homes by investing in the Dawlish link bridge. I am also delighted that in the wider Devon area, the successful south-west Exeter bid for forward funding will provide over £55 million to unlock 2,500 new homes, delivering road improvements, suitable alternative natural green space, GP surgery facilities and strengthened utilities provision. That money is going towards ensuring that planned new development is supported by the infrastructure that the community needs.

The planning system should be genuinely plan-led, with up-to-date plans providing a framework for addressing environmental, social and economic priorities for an area. Local plans are prepared in consultation with communities and play a key role in delivering necessary development and infrastructure in the right places. Community participation is vital in that. The best plans are those in which communities have been effectively engaged throughout the process. Having an up-to-date plan in place is essential to plan for housing, providing clarity to communities and developers about where homes and supporting development should be built and where not, so that development is planned for rather than being the result of speculative planning applications.

Through the revised national planning policy framework, we have made significant reforms to make it easier and quicker to get a plan in place. We have introduced flexibility in plan making, with a new, more flexible plan-making framework and an expectation that plans are kept up to date through review at least every five years. That ensures that local people have the opportunity to engage with the local plan process regularly, and that a plan stays relevant to the community it is prepared for. In addition, neighbourhood planning gives communities direct power to develop a shared vision for the future of their area, and to shape development and growth. I am very pleased to have a neighbourhood planning champion in the debate—my hon. Friend the Member for Henley.

Communities can decide the location of new homes, employment, shops and services, protect local green spaces and heritage and set policies on the design of new buildings. Producing a neighbourhood plan can bring the wider community together in the creation of that shared vision, through the consultation and engagement process. Over 2,600 groups have started the neighbourhood planning process since 2012, in areas that cover 14 million people. I welcome the fact that four neighbourhood plans have been made in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Newton Abbot, and I acknowledge the contribution that those plans make to community involvement in the process.

My hon. Friend went through a list—I think I wrote down 11 specific points—of issues that she wanted to raise. I want to address one or two of them, but I will respond to the rest in writing. There were a number of misapprehensions, if I may say so—that may be my fault because I have not communicated to her some of the things we are doing. She talked about the requirement for new villages. Could we plan for new garden villages? We do have a garden villages programme and are supporting 23 garden villages. We put a prospectus out for more in December last year, expecting to get back a few dozen applications, but we got 100 back. There is a lot of hunger and ambition in local authorities to do exactly that.

On broadband, I agree with my hon. Friend that we want it to spread across the community. It is certainly part of planning guidance that those kinds of facilities should be provided. While not mandatory, local authorities can, through their local plan, encourage developers to put that kind of facility in place. A number of hon. Members mentioned viability, section 106 and transparency; we are moving to make sure that section 106 agreements are published, not only so we can see what our local authority is producing for a local community but to compare the performance of our local authority to that...
of its neighbours. Some local authorities do well on section 106 negotiation and others not so well, so to be able to see across the piece is key. Viabilities should be open, transparent and publicly available, so that local people can see what is being done in their name.

My hon. Friend mentioned support for small developers; she is right that in the crash of 2007-08, about 50% of small developers were wiped out. They used to produce over half of new homes in this country; obviously, that number has fallen significantly. Part of the challenge of getting up to that 300,000 number will be stimulating a whole new generation of developers—both new ones and expanded existing ones. We are putting significant funding and assistance behind helping them to do so. We have a large fund of £1 billion with Barclays, seed funded by Government and with Barclays putting in the rest, specifically to support small developers.

There was a lot of emphasis on our increasing capacity by using modern technology and construction methods. Modular homes are the way to go. Again, we are putting significant amounts of money behind stimulating that market and the adoption of new building techniques. I have challenged large and small developers not to be the Kodak of house building and to ignore technology at their peril, such that they might be rendered obsolete.

It is coming: we reckon there are something like 30 factories across the UK that produce modular homes. There is much more that we can do and we are keen to stimulate that.

The hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh) raised a number of points, many of which we are actually taking up. We have made second home owning more expensive, we are attracting institutional funding into housing and, as she knows, we have given local authorities the ability to change green belt boundaries if they wish, subject to a high bar.

I want to finish by thanking everybody for participating in what has been a detailed debate for just an hour. While we will respond to the points raised, I urge hon. Members please to refrain from imagining that there is some simple solution to the housing crisis in this country. It is a complicated landscape, but we are applying as much energy and industry as we can to building the hundreds of thousands, nay millions of houses that the next generation needs.

5.28 pm

Anne Marie Morris: I thank all the contributors to this debate; there are some things on which we are in violent agreement. I thank the Minister for his reply, particularly the further reply that we are all expecting to the points that we made. However, the question of validating numbers is still unanswered. I ask the Minister to look at how they can be validated because—as other hon. Members have said—sometimes, local authorities are asked to do the impossible. We all want to provide the houses, but we do not have the means to do it. I would like the Minister to focus on giving local authorities more power to do what he says they are authorised to do. Without the money, they cannot enforce and deliver the things that the Minister would like.

We still have not addressed the link between house prices and wages; I would like the Minister to look at that as a matter of urgency. He did not have a chance to respond on the environmental issues; I am pleased to hear about the new villages programme, but we need to look at need. It is not just a bottom-up issue, of “this is what we need;” it is also a top-down issue, as my hon. Friend the Member for Henley pointed out. Some communities will simply not be able to absorb that need. The Government need an overall strategy to put that together. I thank the Minister for taking that on board and I thank all Members for their contributions.

5.30 pm

Motion lapsed, and sitting adjourned without Question put (Standing Order No. 10(14)).
Westminster Hall

Wednesday 12 June 2019

[Geraint Davies in the Chair]

Domestic Abuse and Homelessness

9.30 am

Neil Coyle (Bermondsey and Old Southwark) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered domestic abuse and homelessness.

It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Mr Davies, and I thank everyone for coming this morning. I particularly thank all the organisations that provided briefings for this debate, and all the individuals who have provided their personal experiences and stories to help us make the case for improving the law to prevent people affected by domestic abuse from ending up homeless. The case is harder to make without that experience and those statements, so I am grateful for their input.

I speak as the Member of Parliament for Bermondsey and Old Southwark, and as the chair of the all-party parliamentary group on ending homelessness. Last week we published our report on this issue, entitled “A Safe Home: Breaking the link between homelessness and domestic abuse.” I thank the Minister and many colleagues for attending the launch, and everyone who has signed up to this campaign already. The campaign we are running is supported by many organisations, including Crisis, Women’s Aid, Refuge, St Mungo’s, Shelter, the Domestic Abuse and Housing Alliance, Homeless Link, Changing Lives, Hestia, Centrepoint, Depaul UK, the Chartered Institute of Housing, The Connection at St Martin’s and Surviving Economic Abuse. There is a huge platform behind the campaign, and my thanks go to all the organisations and individuals that have already signed up. The report and materials linked to it are on the Crisis website.

We hold this morning’s debate in the context of a change in Prime Minister and Government. I hope whoever next enters Downing Street, and whatever team they bring together, will not slow down the Domestic Abuse Bill and will accept the aims of our campaign. We have an evidence base that clearly demonstrates the need to improve housing support for survivors of domestic abuse. Some people get no help at all, and even those who can access emergency short-term hostels and refuges face huge and often insurmountable barriers to long-term safe homes. Too many people are being let down, having their lives further damaged and facing further isolation and risk. Sadly, that is today’s grim reality. However, we have a crucial window of opportunity to address this significant concern. I hope the Government will indicate today that they will act quickly using the Domestic Abuse Bill as the vehicle for change.

The national evidence base is worryingly extensive and paints a grim picture of the current situation. I shall go through some key stats to inform this morning’s debate. Research carried out by Crisis found that 61% of women and 16% of men had experienced violence or abuse by a partner. Many of the men affected are from the LGBT community, but the vast majority of people affected are women. One in five of Crisis’s clients who are women report that domestic abuse was the primary cause of their homelessness.

Some 53% of survivors supported by Women’s Aid’s No Woman Turned Away project were prevented from making a valid homelessness application by their local authority. The project provides additional support to women who struggle to access refuge places, but nearly a quarter of the women involved were prevented from even making a homelessness application, as they were told upfront by councils that they would not meet the threshold for priority need.

According to official statistics, 1.6 million women and 695,000 men experienced domestic abuse in England and Wales last year. Domestic abuse is inextricably linked with housing: most abuse occurs at home, and a lack of alternative housing is a key barrier to people escaping domestic abuse. The latest Government statistics, for 2018, show that 5,380 households were made homeless in England over a three-month period because of domestic abuse.

It is vital that victims are given a clear, safe route out of abusive and potentially life-threatening situations, and offered long-term stability. Currently, this is simply not available, but it is a situation that could be easily fixed. Without that fix in place, such abuse has contributed to some horrendous circumstances. One extreme example that was brought to the attention of the APPG on ending homelessness in 2017 was of a woman who was made homeless when her relationship ended after a neighbour contacted the police following a two-day assault by her partner. Despite the clearly visible bruising and a letter from her partner admitting the abuse, she was told by her council that she needed to provide further evidence of her vulnerability and that she was not in a priority need situation. She ended up sofa-surfing for two years.

Sadly, I have also seen evidence in my own constituency surgeries in Bermondsey and Old Southwark. It has been four years since I was first elected in May 2015—I see some other Members from the 2015 intake present this morning—and the casework that I have seen over those four years is something I am desperate to change. I am desperate to be in a position where we can actually reform the situation so that people do not end up in these circumstances.

Carolyn Harris (Swansea East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies. I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this debate. The link between being a victim of domestic abuse and homelessness is undeniable, and the draft Domestic Abuse Bill will be an opportunity to change that. Currently, one person can end a dual tenancy, which means a victim can effectively be left homeless. Does my hon. Friend agree that this must be changed, and that we must ensure that it takes two parties to end a tenancy?

Neil Coyle: Of course, no one should end up homeless as a result of a decision made by someone else. The changes we are seeking would aim to address exactly those kinds of circumstances: domestic abuse situations in which there is a coercive or controlling partner who would do something like that.

Let me return to my casework in Bermondsey and Old Southwark. In four years, I have seen six women with children made homeless as a direct result of abuse.
Those are just the women who have managed to come to my surgery sessions—not everyone will find their MP in such circumstances. Cases that I have seen include one mum who was told to sleep in Walworth police station with her children, rather than return to her abusive partner.

A pregnant woman with a one-year-old son recently came to see me. She was forced to sofa-surf following an incident of domestic violence by her ex-partner. She is not yet 18, so there is additional difficulty in trying to find alternative emergency shelter that caters for under-18s. Last year I met a mother with a five-year-old daughter who was made homeless after being kicked out by the abusive father, who dragged her out of the house half-naked. She was under hostile environment conditions, with no recourse to public funds, and was forced to sofa-surf before further intervention eventually helped secure a home. “No recourse to public funds” conditions used to cover only people who were in this country illegally, but they were extended by Cameron and Clegg’s coalition Government and now affect more than 50,000 British-born children in the UK. The APPG on ending homelessness recommends that no one with dependants is prevented from accessing public funds, as this has directly contributed to families staying with abusive partners, ending up with sex-for-rent landlords, or being forced into rough sleeping and homelessness.

Disturbingly, I have had brought to my attention instances of vulnerability being heightened after someone has sought official support or help. Women forced to stay with abusive partners have been told to go back to their partners to collect ID, or to prove abuse. One example came to the APPG on ending homelessness two years ago. A domestic abuse survivor got an injunction against her husband, who had threatened to kill her and take away her son. He broke the injunction and was put on bail. Her new address was revealed to him in his letter of probation, despite her being relocated due to the risks he posed. Despite the previous history of abuse, her council deemed her not to be at high risk and she was forced to remain in the same property, living in fear.

Despite all the well-documented evidence nationally, the problem persists. If anything, it is growing due to the strain on local authority resources. The Prime Minister—I know it is about to change—claimed austerity was over. That is certainly not how it feels on the frontline in council offices, or to people who seek emergency help. Of course, we are meant to have seen a change under the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017. We should not deny that that legislation has been successful in some ways, but a key loophole has opened up that councils use to deny help. The context is important, and we all have examples of what councils have lost, particularly since 2010—being starved of resources. My council has lost half its funding from central Government.

On top of losing funding, many councils have had additional responsibilities placed on them, putting further pressure on limited resources. That includes the families of parents who are subject to “no recourse to public funds” conditions. It is estimated that, last year, London councils provided £53 million of help to that group alone under what is supposed to be emergency children’s social services provisions. Southwark is disproportionately affected, and is forced to provide more than £6 million of support for families in those circumstances alone.

More positively, the Homelessness Reduction Act means that local authorities have a legal duty to provide meaningful support to everyone who approaches them as homeless. They must provide support to prevent people from becoming homeless and to find a home for those who are already presenting as homeless. Despite that welcome change, there is no guarantee that people fleeing domestic abuse will receive an offer of settled housing if the other options fail.

New research in the report published last week by the ending homelessness group reveals that almost 2,000 households fleeing domestic abuse in England every year are not being provided with a safe home by their local authority because they are not considered a priority need. That research was conducted after the Homelessness Reduction Act was introduced, which shows that there is a key weakness in this area. Of course, 2,000 households is not a huge number in Government terms, so extending automatic priority need to that group would not result in a new or significant burden on councils. It would, however, have a hugely positive and significant impact on the lives of the people fleeing dangerous and potentially life-threatening situations, who currently face the further devastation of homelessness.

Karen became homeless after suffering shocking violence at the hands of her partner. These are her words:

“It went from punching and kicking to trying to slit my throat, stab me in the stomach, splitting my head open, putting a cigarette out on me, pushing me through a glass coffee table, battering me with a table leg and the final straw was when he tied me to a chair and put my feet in a bowl of water he then plugged a car battery charger in and threatened to electrocute me. I knew I had to get myself and my girl out of there.”

She managed to escape her partner and was found a new home with her children, but she bumped into her ex a year later and the abuse began again. Eventually, social services got involved and her children were taken into care, at which point she was evicted because she was deemed no longer to have priority need. She and her partner ended up sleeping rough. She told us:

“We slept in empty garages, shop doorways, bus shelters even under railway bridges. I had given up on life at this point and didn’t care if I lived or died.”

It was only when her partner died from an illness caused by addiction that she finally felt free to save herself.

Our research shows that, despite the new prevention and relief duties under the Homelessness Reduction Act, survivors are still being found to be not in priority need for the main homelessness duty of settled long-term accommodation, and councils are still simply turning people away. The Government’s recent commitment to place a statutory duty on top-tier local authorities to assess and meet the need for emergency accommodation-based support services for people experiencing domestic abuse is welcome. Our group, and other organisations and all-party groups, have welcomed that, but we have done so with a significant reservation: the commitment falls short of providing people with the safety and security of a permanent long-term home. That is the problem that we are trying to address.

Currently, unless a person experiencing domestic violence can prove that they are more vulnerable than an ordinary person would be if they became homeless, they are not defined as being a priority need or eligible for an offer of settled housing.
Experience shows that domestic abuse in isolation is rarely considered sufficient to qualify someone as being in priority need, particularly if they do not have dependent children. In 2017, Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government stats showed that only 2% of the people found to be in priority need and made an offer of settled housing were given housing because they were vulnerable as a result of domestic abuse.

Of course, it can be hugely stressful for a survivor to prove that they are homeless due to domestic abuse. During the all-party group’s inquiry into domestic abuse and homelessness in 2017, we heard evidence of local authorities consistently failing to provide people fleeing domestic abuse with the help they need. We also heard that the vulnerability test is being used as a gatekeeping tool to deny access to services and support. We also heard accounts of survivors being told to return home to a dangerous situation to retrieve ID or other evidence to prove that they were homeless due to domestic abuse. One woman told us that she was told to return home to get a letter from the perpetrator stating that he had raped and attacked her. Those situations must end, and we have the means to do that.

Crisis’s “No One Turned Away” research found that many local authorities are failing adequately to assist people presenting as homeless due to domestic abuse, and that there is often a lack of sensitivity when dealing with survivors. There are accounts of people being asked to recount experiences of abuse and violence in public, often in crowded housing office waiting rooms, or being asked to return to the perpetrator. That must end, and we have the means to do that.

We do not come to the Chamber empty-handed. The campaign believes that everyone who experiences domestic abuse is by definition vulnerable and should be placed in the automatic priority need category. We call on the Government to ensure that the Domestic Abuse Bill makes provision to ensure that all survivors of domestic abuse have access to a safe, long-term home. We ask that everyone fleeing domestic abuse who is homeless be automatically considered as in priority need for settled housing, rather than subject to the vulnerability test to determine whether they qualify. Without that change, people who are homeless due to fleeing domestic abuse will still be required to prove additional vulnerability, which can be impossible. Our findings show that almost 2,000 people in those circumstances are denied help.

Those are the aims of the campaign and today’s debate. We have even tabled amendments to the draft Domestic Abuse Bill that I hope the Government will accept. I hope the Minister can give us an indication about that this morning. I thank the housing team at Garden Court Chambers—especially Liz Davies—for their work on the amendments. For those who need a copy of the amendments in full, they are on pages 26 and 27 of the all-party group report. The “A Safe Home” campaign report, published last week, is on Crisis’s website.

If the Minister has any reservation about the amendments, I hope she will air them here so we can move forward and improve them. The Government can, of course, adapt or adopt the amendments or introduce their own proposals. I really hope we will hear something positive from the Minister. I thank other hon. Members in this Chamber in advance. I know that they have worked on this issue for many years and will bring a wealth of experience to the debate.

9.46 am

**Liz Saville Roberts** (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): I thank the hon. Member for Bermondsey and Old Southwark (Neil Coyle) for securing this important debate and for his thorough and interesting introduction. I have been privileged to be a member of the Joint Committee on the Draft Domestic Abuse Bill, and I was very interested to hear from the Minister on housing last month. We heard considerable evidence about how domestic abuse and homelessness are directly connected. Domestic abuse is, of course, inextricably linked to housing, which, alongside health and education, is devolved to Wales, whereas justice and policing issues are reserved to Westminster. That means that the draft Bill contains an interesting mix of responsibilities. During the Joint Committee’s work, we heard about the Violence against Women, Domestic Abuse and Sexual Violence (Wales) Act 2015. There is therefore a complex picture of devolved and reserved powers, and Government responses diverge as they develop.

**Jessica Morden** (Newport East) (Lab): The Government’s recent announcement about accommodation-based services is an example of that. They have promised funding to give refuges and other accommodation a long-term, sustainable future, which is welcome, but does the right hon. Lady agree that it is essential that they also ensure that Wales is funded to be able to do that? It is a national network, and we do not want to risk there being a postcode lottery.

**Liz Saville Roberts**: Yes, indeed. Later, I will raise the issue of the difference in the definition of priority need. The reality is that it is one thing to have a definition, but another to have the resources to implement those policies in Wales. That applies to Wales as much as it does to Westminster and across borders.

In relation to Wales, Shelter Cymru found that in 2017, people from 1,218 households became homeless due to the violent breakdown of a relationship with a partner. Survivors of domestic abuse in Wales already have a priority need for accommodation, which is not the case in England. It is evident, therefore, that legislation in England should follow Wales’s lead. Automatic priority should be introduced to ensure that more individuals who have experienced abuse are given the help they need when at risk of homelessness. Of course, equally important in Wales and England is the need to ensure that sufficient resources are available to enable automatic priority in practical terms. Politicians have every temptation to create policies and legislation, but realising them is as, if not more, important.

By way of an effective response to domestic abuse, Wales cries out for co-ordination in its complex mix of devolved and reserved responsibilities. That means additional layers of governance and accountability for the Domestic Abuse Bill and for the domestic abuse commissioner that the Bill will create. I understand that the Minister present will not necessarily be directly responsible for the domestic abuse commissioner and the answerability of that person, but as housing is a devolved matter, and this issue will be raised in Wales and in Westminster because of the domestic abuse commissioner’s lynchpin role, will she tell us how she anticipates working with others on the role of the commissioner?
I urge the Minister to explain how the commissioner will work effectively in Wales to ensure the best outcome for victims. I propose that there should be a duty on the commissioner to consult specifically with partners and agencies in Wales, and that the work of the commissioner should be subject to scrutiny by the National Assembly for Wales. At present, although well intentioned and well planned, different agencies are not co-ordinated between Wales and England, despite the cross-border aspect mentioned by my friend, the hon. Member for Newport East (Jessica Morden). There is real concern that the Domestic Abuse Bill will not effectively hold to account and measure the interface between devolved and reserved matters.

The Domestic Abuse Bill, which I am sure we look forward to as a means to address the problems under discussion, must respect the legislative divergence between England and Wales, and ensure that the UK and Welsh Governments work closely to bring about positive change. Diolch yn fawr, Mr Davies.

9.51 am

Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Bermondsey and Old Southwark (Neil Coyle) on securing this debate and on all the work that he does with the all-party parliamentary group on ending homelessness, which he leads ably, and presumably alone, now that his Conservative counterpart, the hon. Member for Colchester (Will Quince), has been promoted. I wish my hon. Friend well for the future of that all-party parliamentary group, which has done some incredibly important work and given Government clear direction on actions that they could take further to reduce homelessness and on additional steps beyond that which they have already done.

I wanted to participate in the debate because on Friday, at my regular weekly surgery, three cases of domestic abuse came to me. I wish that that was unusual, but sadly, it is not. I will focus on two of those cases, which have particular links to housing. I thought that the Government response to today’s debate might come from a Home Office Minister, rather than the Minister with responsibility for housing and homelessness, because of the nature of the domestic abuse involved. I trust that the Minister will have close conversations with her Home Office counterpart following the debate.

The first case that came before me involved a woman who had experienced severe financial coercive control at the hands of her former partner. After six years of a relationship—five years as a co-mortgager with the individual—the woman has been left with full responsibility for the mortgage and all the utility bills, as well as associated bills for which her former partner happily took her money for five years, but never actually paid the companies. Her ex-partner will not allow her to remove herself from or seek to close down that mortgage, although she is the one who engages with all the different agencies to try to work out a payment plan for all the debt accrued as a result of that relationship.

This woman has been to every organisation that she can think of, whether it be Women’s Aid, StepChange or her local authority, and has even taken advice from a solicitor on how to extricate herself from this situation. The only response is that she should default on her part of the mortgage payments, which would significantly affect her credit rating, and allow the property to be repossessed and sold by the bank at auction, at a much lower price than if it were sold on the open market. Both she and her partner would lose out, but her former partner could not care less about losing out—all he wants is to ensure that she struggles and that she cannot move any further along.

As an exercise in domestic abuse, such financial coercion is already legislated for, but the police simply do not seem to have the ability, focus and priorities to investigate such incredibly complex and sensitive situations, and the available avenues left to my constituents are few and far between. I hope that the Minister will meet the Home Office Minister, with whom I have already had a conversation about this particular case, to ensure that we see in the upcoming Domestic Abuse Bill a much greater focus on financial measures and packages, and on the institutions that can better support those in controlling relationships, particularly of a financial nature.

On homelessness, for that individual in that first case, getting either another mortgage or private rented accommodation will be very difficult and challenging with a poor credit rating.

The second case involves a woman who had been in a very violent relationship with her former partner, with whom she had four children. The partner was in a particular situation, and the police gave my constituent just 48 hours to get out of the family home and remove themselves as far away as possible.

The homelessness team put this woman and her four children into emergency bed-and-breakfast accommodation, but that was not entirely suitable. It was a long way from the children’s schools, which made it impossible for the mother to do any work because most of the day was spent taking four children back and forth to school on public transport. Her finances were certainly taken up by doing that, because she received no additional financial support in that situation. She then began sofa-surfing with her family, which has gone on for more than two years since they were advised to move on from that housing association property.

The homelessness team has now found my constituent a home, which she has been told is permanent, but after a matter of months the walls are crumbling, the roof and the bathroom leak, the whole house has electrical problems and electricians have assessed it as a tinderbox waiting to go up, and an outbuilding in the garden is so dangerous that the children cannot play out there, and one of them has already injured themselves in it. There is a crisis in the kind of property that local authorities can offer people in such dire situations. It would be great if the council or the housing association had sufficient properties, but when my constituent has asked the housing association to rehouse her in more suitable accommodation, she has been told that she made herself voluntarily homeless, and she has accrued debts as a result of non-payment of rent.

I cannot believe that Lincolnshire Housing Partnership, the housing association in question in this case, does not allow a waiver for individuals who have experienced
domestic abuse to say that they are leaving a property, particularly when that is done under police advice. I cannot believe that the housing association cannot do more to ensure that people are properly accommodated.

Government have done some good work to prevent those who are suffering from domestic violence and seeking housing support from being turned away from neighbouring or external local authorities merely because they have no local connection. That is welcome. The Minister will know that I am very aware of the work undertaken to try to tackle rogue landlords and protect those in the private rental sector, but these two cases show that financial coercion as a crime is not fully investigated with the same vigour as other forms of physical abuse.

The support is not available.

Much more could be done to get the institutions that offer mortgages to provide some breathing space and freeze mortgages until the situation is resolved to ensure that individuals are not punished. The partner of my constituent has gone to ground and constantly changes address so that the mortgage company cannot get hold of him and insist that he sign documentation. That is deeply frustrating for my constituent, because in her eyes she is the victim: she has done everything she can, having done all the right things and having gone to all the right agencies, yet still she will lose out.

The housing association procedures do not seem to reflect the reality of people’s lives. In those extraordinary circumstances, there must be some flexibilities in processes and procedures to make sure that people, particularly children, are not at a disadvantage. Council homelessness teams do not have sufficient good-quality properties to house people properly and rogue landlords are still getting away with offering poor-quality—and frankly, in this situation, dangerous—properties to incredibly vulnerable people. They are taking advantage: a local authority would be charged a much higher rate to house such people, who would feel they had no other choice. There are feelings of helplessness, hopelessness and failing as a parent, as well as the great impact of the disruption on the lives and education of my constituents’ children. That shows that the Government have a role to play to offer greater resources to close the many, very obvious gaps.

I would not feel so strongly about this issue if people coming to see me about it was not a weekly occurrence, but that is what it is, and they all experience similar housing situations. We have a great refuge service in Great Grimsby run by Women’s Aid, which caters for people across the country, but that is not a permanent home. When victims have done nothing wrong, being forced out of their home feels like further punishment.

I hope that in the Domestic Abuse Bill, as well as in the Minister’s remarks, there will be an acceptance that Government should prioritise victims remaining securely in their own homes, with the perpetrator being removed and prevented from interfering with their victims and the wider family. I wholeheartedly believe that it should not be the victims who lose their homes, communities, friends, family, social clubs, schools or jobs, and I hope the Minister shares my view.

10.4 am

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Member for Bermondsey and Old Southwark (Neil Coyle) on bringing forward this matter for our consideration. It is always a great pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Great Grimsby (Melanie Onn). All Members who have spoken have given examples of why the system needs to do better. I am pleased to see the Minister in her place and I look forward to her response.

As always in these debates, I will give a Northern Ireland perspective and a couple of examples of how we can do better in Northern Ireland when it comes to domestic abuse and homelessness. Some of the shortcomings of the system that I see may replicate what everyone else has said so far. Domestic abuse is simply heartbreaking, and almost every week in my advice centre I deal with those issues on my constituents’ behalf. I am blessed to have extremely good, sympathetic and compassionate staff who can be a listening ear for the stories that are told, but also point people to where they need to go.

In the period from 1 April 2016 to 31 March 2017, the Police Service of Northern Ireland recorded 29,166 incidents of domestic violence, 13,933 domestic crimes and three murders. That is in a small population of 1.8 million. Unfortunately, that is a fairly clear picture of things in Northern Ireland.

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): The hon. Gentleman underlines some stark statistics, and obviously each number represents a person. Although it was not in Northern Ireland, last week at the White Ribbon UK conference we were lucky enough to hear from Luke Hart, who gave extremely powerful and humbling testimony about his father killing his mother and sister, just days after he and his brother Ryan had managed to secure their freedom from the family home where they had been under coercive control and abuse, which had been normalised, for more than 30 years. It is about not just securing appropriate accommodation, but keeping the abused safe from the perpetrator thereafter. That is an additional requirement that we cannot forget when we are talking about ending homelessness caused by domestic abuse.

Jim Shannon: I thank the hon. Gentleman for sharing that story; it is a salient reminder to us all that there is a lot more to domestic abuse than meets the eye.

We are very pleased to have Women’s Aid refuges there to assist when needed, but they are frequently filled to capacity and must turn away women and their children. This debate enables us to look at how the system can respond better, because although Women’s Aid refuges can give assistance, more often than not it is the housing associations on the frontline that have to respond.

The relationship between domestic violence and homelessness is complex, as the hon. Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire North (Gavin Newlands) made clear in his intervention. It is often underpinned by a range of factors such as gender inequality, socioeconomic disadvantage, mental ill health and poor access to income support and housing. Although domestic violence occurs in same-sex relationships and can happen to men, the overwhelming number of victims are women at the hands of a male partner or family member. That is the reality that I see in my constituency. In nearly every case, the victim feels as though they are tied into that unhealthy, bad relationship because they do not know where they will live with their children if they leave.
I will give an example of someone who came to me with a problem and did not know what to do, because they did not have the finances—the hon. Member for Great Grimsby referred to that at some length. I am dealing with a case where the partner of a young lady with three children threatened her with a knife, and her 13-year-old daughter heard it. That was the moment when the mother decided to do something, because until then, the threats, beatings and physical abuse had been only against her. At that moment, the mother realised that she was no longer the only one who was affected—although that had been bad enough.

The mother came into the office unsure what to do, as she and her partner both work. She does not understand the Housing Executive system and the allocation of points. I am sure the system in the rest of the United Kingdom is the same, but if it is not, it might help if I explain how the Housing Executive system works. She told my personal assistant, “I just don’t know how to get out with my three kids, but when my eldest daughter heard him say that, I knew I had to do something.” That was the catalyst. She said, “I can’t have her growing up and thinking that this is a normal situation.” That was the catalyst. She said, “I can’t have her growing up and thinking that this is a normal situation.”

It has taken not threats against the mum, but threats against the future mental health of her children to make her take that step. She is still in that house while she tries to find a way forward. The sad fact is that because her mum and dad have a three-bedroom house, her situation is not classed as overcrowding. I will explain the system. She will automatically qualify for 70 points for being homeless. The threat of violence will probably mean another 20 points, because it is not a deep threat in the sense that someone could be murdered—she would get more points for that. The solution for that lady is to move in with her parents. She would have qualified for overcrowding and sharing points, but because her parents have a three-bedroom house, there are probably enough bedrooms available, so she will not get any overcrowding points and she may not get some of the sharing points.

We have to try to find a system that would enable that lady, who is suffering from domestic abuse, automatically and urgently to receive the necessary points to find her a house anywhere in Newtownards. Since she has to rely on the current system, she is trapped. That worries me. Under the system currently applied by the Housing Executive and the housing associations, she would need 150 or 160 points to get a house in Newtownards, so 70 points is a long way off what is necessary. We need a system that reflects that.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): My hon. Friend outlines the difficulties and complexities for domestic abuse victims of getting accommodation if they choose to do so. Does he agree that, on some occasions, the perpetrator of the domestic abuse is well aware of the difficulties the person they are abusing would face in getting accommodation and actually deploys that, to some effect, to try to ensure that they stay in the home where the abuse is taking place?

Jim Shannon: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. The partner often knows the system better than their other half—the lady who is trying to find a way out. The situation is also complicated by the fact that, more often than not, the finances of the family are done by the male partner. The hon. Member for Great Grimsby referred to that, and I know it to be true in almost every case. The name on the rent book is probably the male partner’s, the application for housing benefit is probably in his name, and although the lady’s name would be on the tax credits system, applications for working tax credit would be done through him. For someone who has to leave because of threats to themselves and their family, the financial implications complicate matters. They ask themselves, “How do I get out of this system? How do I make sure I have finance to get me beyond whenever I move out?”

However, many people step in to help. The girls in my office have asked the local church charity shop to send a team to pack that girl and her kids up in one day so that when her partner returns it is a fait accompli. A method of getting her out of that house has been found. We always look to the Government, as we probably should, for a response, but the Government cannot step in all the time, so voluntary bodies—in this case a church group—sometimes step in to make the move to get a person out. My office is working with the Housing Executive and the local community group to get that young lady’s points assessed urgently—in other words, to get her the extra points she needs to get on the list so she can go elsewhere—and is providing her with emotional support, including looking at schools in a different location.

Although it does my heart good to see that we are able to help that person, we always wonder—I am sure you think the same as the rest of us, Mr Davies—how many other people out there are going through all this but do not know about the help that is available. It is good when victims know that there is help available, that people care, that they are not alone in their cycle of abuse and that that cycle can be stopped. We need a system that responds urgently to the victimised person and their family. How do we do that? Will the Minister say how we can have a system in which people’s circumstances are more urgently assessed?

Knowing that a domestic abuse call is made to the PSNI every two minutes shakes me to my core. As a grandfather, I pray that my granddaughters, when they grow up, will find good men, and that they will be good women as well. However, sometimes things do not work out, so we also need to know that should that happen—should they be blinded and miss the warning signs—there would be help available to get them out of a harmful situation. I very much agree with Women’s Aid that the current system does not respond in the way it needs to. It is not enough.

I hear these stories in my office and in the church circles I move in. I call for an urgent overhaul of the allocation system so domestic abuse victims are homed as quickly as possible. They should also be able to request correspondence only by email. Sending a letter through the post may inadvertently alert a woman’s partner to the fact that she has applied to be housed by the Housing Executive, for example. The partner may open the letter and say, “You’re moving out? What’s this all about?” There has to be another method. We must be sensitive to how we communicate with and treat people in such difficult positions. No one should feel stuck in a dangerous partnership that they seem unable to get out of. The welfare system is in place for the vulnerable, as it should be, and it is the responsibility of...
us all to point people in the right direction, but we need to do better by them. For the sake of my grandchildren and everyone else’s, we need to do very much better.

10.16 am

**Kirsty Blackman** (Aberdeen North) (SNP): Thank you for chairing the debate, Mr Davies. I thank the hon. Member for Bermondsey and Old Southwark (Neil Coyle) for bringing it forward.

This is an incredibly important issue and it is vital that we tackle it. Someone who is going through domestic abuse is incredibly vulnerable. They may be being physically or verbally abused, or both. They may be being coerced or controlled financially. Despite all that, leaving that situation is not easy. For someone who has been coerced and controlled, and whose partner has made it clear to them that they are the one in the wrong, finding the energy to leave that situation is very hard. It is even more difficult when they know they do not have anywhere to go and that there is no system in place to ensure that they have safe accommodation.

I have discussed this issue with a number of constituents who have come through my door, and I have spoken to Women’s Aid and various other organisations about the issues people face. If we could make it easier for one person to leave an abusive partner and get out of that situation, that would be a good thing. Anything we can do to make that process easier—to ensure that people who are suffering from abuse can find the energy to leave because they know they will be supported—is a good thing. It is incumbent on us to make those changes and to promote any policies that will bring them about.

The position of children in domestic abuse situations has been mentioned. There are often, although not always, children in these situations. The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) pointed out that we have to consider things such as schools when children are involved. Why should somebody who is being abused—who has not done anything wrong—have to move their children’s school, and go through a massive change to their life and the lives of their children, just because of the perpetrator’s evil behaviour? We can and should do better in that regard when providing support to people.

We also need to ensure that we stop people from going back. We must do everything we can to ensure that support is in place—both physical support for housing and navigating complex systems if, for example, schools and so on need to be changed, and emotional support—so that people can start the healing process and get through it. If someone has been so badly controlled that they believe everything is their fault and not the perpetrator’s, it is much more difficult to get through that process; it is much easier to contemplate going back. That is why we need to ensure that the emotional support is there.

**Liz Saville Roberts:** The Scottish Government have been trying to address the issue of split payments and universal credit. Does the hon. Lady agree that that has been one way of trying to enable people—through being in power by having their own finances—to leave? None the less, although that policy is in place, I understand it has not been all that easy to put into effect.

**Kirsty Blackman:** That is absolutely right. I wonder whether the right hon. Lady can see my speech, as I was about to come to that point. That universal credit is a single payment is a really big problem, particularly for families where there is a financial control element to the domestic abuse. Because of that, it is really important that the victim has their own financial means and the ability to build up a pot of money. It must be even more terrifying for them to think about leaving if they have not got any money.

The SNP Scottish Government are determined to deliver split payments for universal credit, because that would be a good way to stop the exacerbation of financially controlling behaviour. The problem is, the Scottish Government cannot deliver split payments until the Department for Work and Pensions gets the system sorted out. We would like to do so as soon as possible. The Scottish Government have proposed to DWP how they think it could be delivered, and it would be good if that happened as soon as possible. I urge the UK Government to do so in the rest of the UK, because the single payment is a big problem that aids those who are determined to financially control their partners.

**Neil Coyle:** Instead of split payments, which I support—the Select Committee on Work and Pensions is also working on that—has the SNP Government also considered making payments automatically to the primary carer, who is almost always the woman in the relationship and the mother of the children?

**Kirsty Blackman:** I honestly do not know and I do not want to give a wrong answer. That is not my area of expertise. I will find out and get back to the hon. Gentleman. We are keen to see split payments, but his proposal also has merit.

I turn to universal credit and increasing homelessness. Some 75% of local authorities believe that universal credit will increase homelessness. The Scottish Government are doing what they can to mitigate the impacts of austerity on the social security system, but it is really important that the UK Government halt the roll-out of universal credit, because it has not long happened in Aberdeen and I am beginning to see a massive increase in the case load coming through my door. I imagine a number of those families will end up homeless as a result of the changes to the benefit system made by the UK Government.

To tackle homelessness, we also need to build more homes, and not just homes that people can buy with a mortgage, whether at normal prices or affordable prices. It is also about social housing. In the four years to 2018, the Scottish Government have delivered per head of population 50% more affordable homes than have been delivered in England, and five times as many socially rented properties. I still maintain that one of the best things ever done by the SNP Government was cancelling right to buy. The social housing situation in my constituency has changed drastically. It is still far from perfect, because we have not had time to build all the new houses we need, but if more socially rented properties were available, people would be able to go into those properties. We also do not have a priority need system in Scotland; everyone who is homeless or at risk of homelessness is in priority need and therefore given access to the housing they require. On 1 April the Domestic Abuse (Scotland) Act 2018 came into force. It makes clear that coercive and controlling behaviour is domestic abuse, and that it is a crime.
To return to the availability of safe housing for all, the hon. Member for Bermondsey and Old Southwark mentioned the women—and men, in fact—who were not born here but who have come to this country and have no recourse to public funds. Those cases are the most devastating that I see around the table at my constituency surgeries. Basically, “no recourse to public funds” means that someone cannot claim public funds because of their immigration status. They cannot claim housing benefit, which is incredibly relevant for those in a domestic abuse situation looking to go into a refuge. I found out only recently that in England—this is not the case in Scotland—such families do not have access to free school meals, so children are not being provided with food. In Scotland, John Swinney sent a directive to local authorities saying that such children should be entitled to free school meals whether they have recourse to public funds or not, and schools are working together to ensure that that happens. We should not see children going hungry.

On “no recourse to public funds”, I promoted a private Member’s Bill that asked for the destitution domestic violence concession open to those from outside the European economic area fleeing domestic violence to be opened to EU nationals as well. That would allow them access to housing benefit for a period to go into refuge provision, which is incredibly important. In fact, we could also cancel “no recourse to public funds”, which would be incredibly helpful. It is vital that everyone has a home.

I finish with advice and a stat from Police Scotland. It launched a campaign called “every nine minutes”, because it responds to a domestic abuse call every nine minutes. Domestic abuse is illegal, and it is really important that we remember it is the perpetrator’s fault. It is not society? She spoke of the coercive financial control that they live with is also supposedly not a good enough reason. Someone may even find that having children, with all those additional vulnerabilities, counts for nothing.

The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) spoke about the heartbreak caused by domestic violence, and he praised support services for their work. We must recognise the tremendous work done by such organisations across the country. He emphasised the need for more capacity in the system, and said that the Northern Ireland Housing Executive could do much more.

Women are fleeing their homes because of mental and physical abuse. The third sector is acting. We know we must provide that support, yet such services are wide and varied. A briefing from the Royal College of Psychiatrists stated that victims of domestic abuse are three times more likely than other women to develop mental illness—indeed, those who shared their stories last week all spoke of that. Addressing this issue only begins with housing, and we must fight for the health support that survivors need, and do whatever it takes to get them back on their feet. That could be help in pursuing further training or education, if that is what they want, or support in getting into employment. We must give people control over their own lives.

I can only imagine what it must be like for those who have experienced domestic violence and abuse to fear going home to the place where they are supposed to feel safest, to be frightened of the person who is supposed to care for them, or to cover physical marks and pass them off being caused by an accident. As we know, domestic violence is not always physical, but it can torture and abuse one’s mind in ways that some simply will not understand.

My hon. Friend the Member for Great Grimsby (Melanie Onn) said that it was not unusual for her to hear about three domestic abuses cases in each of her surgeries. Is that not a terrible condemnation of our society? She spoke of the coercive financial control that had left her constituent with huge debts, and yet that constituent was told that she should just default on her mortgage payments and lose her home, and then she might escape. That is not good enough. My hon. Friend called for changes to the Domestic Abuse Bill, and for
the various agencies to recognise the specific needs of people who have been abandoned in a similar financial situation. I look forward to hearing the Minister’s response.

Some might say that stopping domestic abuse is an impossible task, but we must ensure that there is support to make leaving as easy as possible. My hon. Friend the Member for Bermondsey and Old Southwark outlined the tremendous barriers that survivors face. Work to put things right starts with putting those who have experienced domestic violence at the top of the housing list, but there are other considerations, and the wishes of the victim must always come first. We cannot have people being moved, without a say, away from their families and friends or their support network. Those networks are essential parts of helping a victim of domestic abuse to get on in life, and we cannot allow politicians and council officers to decide what happens to a person in such circumstances. Let me be clear: Labour’s position is that survivors of domestic abuse must be put in the highest possible category when it comes to housing, and I invite the Minister to match that this morning.

We will not get anywhere without an adequate housing supply. My hon. Friend the Member for Great Grimsby spoke of local authorities and housing associations, and of the shortage of homes. The hon. Member for Aberdeen North (Kirsty Blackman) smiled when she stated that obvious fact, as if it is a no-brainer. We need more homes in this country, and we cannot meet the need if we do not build them. There are already countless people in the highest category for housing support—older people, young people and people with families who, at best, are living with friends or family. Waiting lists for homes are incredibly long, and to address the problem we must build more housing stock. It is of little use including victims of domestic violence in the top priority band if they simply have to compete with others in the top bands and wait years for an adequate home. Unless we have the housing stock, I fear that changing the law could be just a formality and not help those who need it.

Many excellent organisations have come together to back a change to the Housing Act 1996, and other legislation, and to support the Domestic Abuse Bill and introduce that automatic qualification for survivors of abuse to have priority need for settled housing. It would be good to hear the Minister say that that will happen. Those organisations include Refuge, Women’s Aid, St Mungo’s, Shelter, Crisis—I could go on, but my hon. Friend the Member for Bermondsey and Old Southwark already gave a considerable list in his opening remarks. Those organisations are the experts in tackling domestic violence and homelessness, and the Government must listen to them.

The Government must recognise that there is a gap, and that vulnerable people are being let down. We can address that with a change to the legislation. In 2017, nearly 7,000 people cited the breakdown of a relationship with an abusive partner as the primary reason for their homelessness, and that did not include the number of people who opted not to leave an abusive partner because they feared being made homeless. We can change the law to give victims more support to leave if they wish, and we could provide the resource for their lives to change for the better. It must be a priority for those people to be rehoused by the local authority.

We must build more houses if we are to address waiting lists in this country but—I say this with experience of serving as a former councillor and cabinet member in a local authority—the homes that we provide must be of a decent standard. Many of us will have heard of the poor housing conditions in which our constituents have found themselves—with mould, with heating that does not work, and with unsuitable or unhygienic furnishings. That is supposed to be a place that they consider home. Local authorities must ensure that those homes, whether they are in the private sector, the local authority or a housing association, are fit for use. We know that some landlords are indifferent to the quality of the home they provide, as long as they get their rent. Local authorities must step in and ensure that those homes are fit for people to live in.

Vulnerable people will often not complain about poor conditions because they fear being turfed out and losing their sanctuary. They should never be put in conditions that we would complain about, and they should not fear making such complaints. This weekend I heard the case of a woman in my constituency who is fleeing domestic violence and has been given a house. She said: “I realise I am extremely lucky to be given a house given the shortage of housing”; but the house she has been given is in awful condition. She was offered the property in early March, but because of errors there have been long delays. She received the keys last week, and she sent me the pictures of what she was confronted with—severe black mould in the bedrooms that would be her children’s accommodation. She has gone through extreme difficulty, but she has been given a house that is unsuitable for her and her family. The £125 decorating grant was no consolation at all, and she is distraught. My caseworkers are working to try to get her a better deal.

This is not just about putting domestic abuse survivors in the top priority category; we must also ensure that the home they are given is of a good standard and quality. That is not just about cleanliness, but about the safety and security of the property—that point was raised by other Members this morning. Some domestic abusers will try to find their victims, particularly if their victims are housed in the same locality. Many victims choose to stay in the locality, because it is their community and it is where they have family connections. They should not be fearing for their safety and the safety of their family once they have left the abuser. Damaged windows and doors must be dealt with before new tenants move in.

The last thing that those who are fleeing domestic violence need is a requirement to prove their abuse before they can be rehoused; others have spoken in more detail and better than I can on that topic. Tell me Minister, how does a person prove emotional and mental abuse? I certainly do not have a clue. There are no bruises or scars that the eye can see, but that does not make the injuries less horrific or the victim in any less need of a home. Putting the burden of proof on to the person who has made the move to leave their abuser is inhumane and cruel.

Those who are fleeing domestic violence are quite literally running for their lives; let us give them priority, but let us build the housing they need. We must make sure that we can put a roof over their heads, but also provide the support services that they desperately need.
The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Mrs Heather Wheeler):

It is always a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies, and I thank hon. Members from across the House for their considered speeches. I particularly congratulate the hon. Member for Bermondsey and Old Southwark (Neil Coyle) on securing the debate and on his tireless work as chair of the all-party parliamentary group on ending homelessness. I am delighted that his health has recovered since last week, when he missed the launch of this interesting document.

This Government have made domestic abuse a key priority and we are committed to doing everything we can to end domestic abuse. Domestic abuse is a cross-Government issue, but I shall focus solely on the work of the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government. Since 2014, our Department has invested £55.5 million in accommodation-based services, including refuges, to support victims of domestic abuse.

We have recently launched a consultation on future delivery of support to victims and their children in accommodation-based domestic abuse services, which ends on 2 August. The consultation complements wider Government work on tackling domestic abuse and supporting victims, including the new Domestic Abuse Bill. Proposals in the consultation include a new legal duty on local authorities to provide support for domestic abuse services for victims and their children. This will provide a range of services to support victims and their children in secure accommodation.

Local authorities will be required to work together across boundaries to ensure domestic abuse services reflect the needs of local people, including targeted, specialist support for black, Asian and minority ethnic survivors; lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender survivors; and, Gypsy, Roma and Traveller survivors. We will work with local authorities adequately to fund the new duty. We estimate the early broad annual cost to be around £90 million per year. However, we want the full cost to be informed by the consultation and taken into the spending review.

I was asked questions about the domestic abuse commissioner.

Melanie Onn: Is the Minister planning to accept the amendment proposed in the report “A Safe Home”?

Mrs Wheeler: We want to be informed by the consultation, which finishes on 2 August. We will look at everything in the round after that.

The domestic abuse commissioner will be funded by the Home Office and operate UK-wide. The £90 million will be subject to the Barnett formula for Wales, Northern Ireland and Scotland.

Ensuring that everyone has a decent, affordable, secure home is a key priority for this Government. That is why we have made a commitment to halve rough sleeping by 2022 and end the practice altogether, and why we are dedicated to preventing people from becoming homeless in the first place. It is simply unacceptable that people have to sleep on the streets in 2019. That does not reflect the country we want to be and I am determined to put a stop to it.

My Department, with support from colleagues across Government, has been working tirelessly to put in place new support for people who sleep rough. This has included the rough sleeping strategy, published last August, which sets out our plan to end rough sleeping, alongside bespoke support and funding for local areas through the rough sleeping initiative.

I want to focus specifically on the work the Department is doing to help women. We know that violence and abuse are a key factor in women being made homeless or having to sleep rough. Through our rough sleeping strategy, boldly backed by £100 million in funding, we are providing more support to those sleeping rough or who are at risk of sleeping rough. Crucially, this includes additional funding for dedicated accommodation, frontline workers who are trained to support vulnerable women, staff working with victims of domestic abuse in local authority housing options, rapid rehousing pathway navigators, and our Somewhere Safe to Stay assessment centres. We will extend this to voluntary organisations, commissioned and non-commissioned services, and staff in homeless hostels.

We have undertaken a procurement exercise to recruit the right organisations to deliver the training and we expect to award contracts to successful suppliers in the near future. As part of our rapid rehousing pathway, we recently announced a Somewhere Safe to Stay hub in Brighton, which will focus on supporting women to get off the streets. These hubs build on the No Second Night Out model rapidly to assess the needs of people who are sleeping rough and those who are at risk of sleeping rough, and support them to get the right help quickly. The Brighton service will be a two-hub model, with one hub reserved for women only and specialising in tackling complex needs. The second hub will be delivered by the domestic abuse charity partner RISE.

We are continuing to provide funding through the rough sleeping initiative to ensure that provision is in place for women who sleep rough. This supports a locally driven approach, with local authorities leading the charge. For instance, Southwark is receiving funding of £585,000. This includes funding for a support worker, through Solace Women’s Aid, which will work with offenders who have experienced domestic abuse. Medway is receiving funding of £486,000, which includes a specialist mental health worker to work with people who have experienced domestic abuse and other health issues, as well as additional housing-led approaches for women with medium and high needs, and couples.

We are supporting 63 projects across England to provide support for over 2,500 victims and their families, and over 2,200 additional bed spaces in accommodation-based services, including refuge. In response to the earlier question, the definition of domestic abuse used by the Home Office and by us includes coercive control.

Underpinning our work on rough sleeping is the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017, which came into force last April. This is the most ambitious reform to homelessness legislation in decades. I am sure many Members are aware that the Act brought in a number of new duties and strengthened a number of existing ones. The Act extends the duties that local authorities owe to homeless households and expands the types of household accommodation-based domestic abuse services, which ends on 2 August. The consultation complements wider Government work on tackling domestic abuse and supporting victims, including the new Domestic Abuse Bill. Proposals in the consultation include a new legal duty on local authorities to provide support for domestic abuse services for victims and their children. This will provide a range of services to support victims and their children in secure accommodation.

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that are entitled to help. That means that, for the first time, people without dependent children, who are often not deemed to be in priority need and were often turned away with little or no assistance, are now entitled to help from their local authority.

The Act strengthened the advice and information duty. This enhanced duty means that local authorities must provide free advice and information about homelessness and the prevention of homelessness. They must also ensure they design advice to meet the needs of particularly vulnerable groups, including those who are victims of domestic abuse.

The Act also strengthened the prevention duty, meaning that local authorities must take reasonable steps to try to prevent a person who is threatened with homelessness within 56 days from becoming homeless regardless of priority need status or whether they have made themselves intentionally homeless. Local authorities must now also take reasonable steps to try to relieve a person of their homelessness, again for a period of 56 days, regardless of priority need status or whether this was done intentionally. At the heart of the Act is a more person-centred approach to find bespoke solutions, including for victims of domestic abuse.

We want survivors to stay in their own homes, when it is safe and possible to do so. Sanctuary schemes are supported as part of our £22 million fund, which lasts from 2018 to 2020. The duty also covers sanctuary schemes across the country. We will work closely with the Home Office and the Ministry of Justice to make sure that that option is always there.

A new duty was also introduced for specified public authorities to refer those whom they think might be homeless or threatened with homelessness to a local housing authority of their choice. Children’s services and A&E services are among the specified public authorities. That will help to ensure that people’s housing needs are considered and that services work together more effectively. We know there have been significant changes for local authorities, which it has taken time to embed. Good progress is being made, but we know that there is more to be done by local areas.

As to our most recent statistics, they are experimental, but there are some promising signs. Since the introduction of the Act just nine months ago, more than 60,000 households, including families and single individuals, have been helped to secure accommodation.

I welcome the report produced by the all-party group, but there are a few discrepancies in it, which I think I must pick up on. Certainly, most of the experiences cited happened before the Homelessness Reduction Act came into force, and I completely understand why. I am aware that prior to the Act people were sometimes turned away without being able to make a homelessness application. That is precisely why the Act is so important and why it had cross-Government—indeed, cross-Chamber—support.

Local authorities must now assess everyone’s needs if they are homeless or threatened—

Neil Coyle: I think it is a little unfair to criticise the report without the collection of proper and robust data by the Government. If the Minister disputes the evidence that has been collected, is she committing the Government to undertaking their own research to get to the bottom of the matter?

Mrs Wheeler: The experimental data are dealt with under the new H-CLIC process—homelessness case level information collection—and when the national statistics authority signs them off as robust, they will be the data. We are collecting them now, and I was just giving a caveat by calling the data experimental. I am delighted to be able to tell the hon. Gentleman that that is exactly what is happening now.

Local authorities must now assess everyone’s needs and are duty bound to provide help for those who are homeless or threatened with homelessness. If any hon. Member is aware of incidents where that is not happening, I would be grateful if they provided me with the names of the authorities, so that we might investigate further. The thresholds for considering someone homeless and at risk of abuse are deliberately low. For example, a woman living in a refuge is considered homeless even though she has a safe place to stay. The definition of domestic abuse includes all forms of abuse, not just physical violence, and a chapter in the statutory code of guidance contains extensive advice on how local authorities should assist people at risk of abuse. It was drafted in collaboration with Women’s Aid.

Our focus is to ensure that the new prevention and relief duties are being deployed to provide help to all eligible people, including single people who do not have priority need. Existing legislation provides that a person who is pregnant or has dependent children, or is vulnerable as a result of having to leave home owing to domestic abuse, already has priority need for accommodation. The Government’s focus is on ensuring that the Homelessness Reduction Act works for all and that those fleeing violent relationships get the support they need.

I hope that my remarks today demonstrate the Government’s commitment to supporting some of the most vulnerable people in our society. Survivors of domestic abuse should not have to fear that escaping their abusers will force them into homelessness, or on to the streets. Survivors must be afforded the dignity of a roof over their head and the ability to move on to build full and independent lives.

On the matter of universal credit and the Department for Work and Pensions, we are working closely with a number of Departments, including the DWP, and will continue to do so as we assess responses to the consultation, which, as I said, ends on 2 August.

It is always an honour for me to represent the Government in debates of this kind. Hon. Members from both sides of the House share the aim of ensuring that people fleeing domestic abuse do not become homeless as a result. The Government have a commitment to providing funding, and to publishing legislation, to go further than ever to support those brave victims. In that spirit, I thank hon. Members for their speeches and questions today. I look forward to working further with the hon. Member for Bermondsey and Old Southwark in his capacity as chair of the all-party group, as we continue to address what is a vital issue.

Geraint Davies (in the Chair): I thank Mr Coyle for taking the trouble to dress like me, and invite him to make a short winding-up speech.
10.54 am

**Neil Coyle:** I got the memo, thank you, Mr Davies.

We have heard from all four countries of the United Kingdom this morning, beginning with the right hon. Member for Dwyfor Meirionnydd (Liz Saville Roberts). The prevalence of the issue is clear from our casework and surgeries, and from examples such as those given by my hon. Friend the Member for Great Grimsby (Melanie Onn). We should not lose sight of the fact that the measures we seek, and that the campaign seeks, are meant to tackle the fact that, sadly, in this country today, two women a week will die at the hands of their partner or ex-partner. That is what we are trying to change, and we have the opportunity before us to do it.

The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) is not in his place, but he made an important point about our staff. We are reliant on our caseworkers to support us in the job we do, and there is not a single member of my team who has not been reduced to tears after trying to help people in circumstances such as those we have discussed this morning. From the Front Benches, the hon. Member for Aberdeen North (Kirsty Blackman) and my hon. Friend the Member for Stockton North (Alex Cunningham) made points about the need for more housing, but also about changes that could help—even if they helped just one person to escape.

As to the report, another 2,000 people have been affected since the introduction of the Act. The Minister asked us to name local authorities that are not providing the required help. That could be done through the freedom of information process, with the organisation involved in compiling the report. We are seeking a simple, outright commitment to accept at least the rationale behind the amendment, even if the amendment itself needs changes. It is frankly disappointing not to have had that this morning.

The Minister has restated commitments on rough sleeping. However, the Government are three decades behind meeting their own target to halve rough sleeping. The figure fell by only 74—according to data based on putting a thumb in the air. Some councils do not even do a head count. There is no way on earth that Southwark could go through every bin cupboard that people are sleeping in—every stairwell, or all the places outside the lifts in tower blocks on the Brandon estate. It just is not done. The Government are not collecting enough data to make the case.

Then the Minister suggested that the all-party group’s report is not sufficient to make the case. It is about saving millions of lives every year, and with immunisation we can also eradicate diseases. The World Health Organisation declared in 1980 that it had eliminated smallpox, a terrible disease that killed a great many people and left survivors with terrible afflictions throughout their lives. I suppose the most famous example of a smallpox sufferer was Queen Elizabeth I.

In 1796—we were a little bit behind the Chinese; I think the first example of Chinese inoculation was about 1,000 years ago—Edward Jenner in Gloucestershire and others noticed that milkmaids caught cowpox, but milkmaids who caught cowpox did not catch smallpox. When that was identified, Edward Jenner inoculated James Phipps, the eight-year-old son of his gardener, and that inoculation protected James Phipps from smallpox. Since then, the World Health Organisation and health organisations around the world have targeted smallpox with such amazing success that the terrible disease has been defeated and eradicated.

Immunisation speaks to something that is increasingly important and increasingly recognised in the national health service: maintaining one’s health rather than having something go wrong and then repairing the damage. It is about asking, “What can we do to keep fit, keep active, avoid excesses in one regard or another and maintain our health?” It is so much cheaper, more effective and better for our standard of living to maintain our health than it is to lose our health and try to regain it. It is also immensely cost-effective: in all situations, the national health service is under resource pressure, and, in terms of both direct and indirect costs, immunisation is reckoned to provide a saving of £13 for every £1 spent.

In the United Kingdom, we do well on immunisation. The population of the UK is well informed and well educated on immunisation, which leads to a high take-up of those vaccinations; but we cannot rest on our laurels. In 2017-18, there was a 91% take-up of the measles, mumps and rubella vaccination in England, the lowest since 2011-12.

It is reckoned that, in order to have herd immunity, an immunisation take-up rate of 95% is needed. A 95% uptake protects the remaining 5% of people who,
for whatever reason, fall through the gaps, do not take the immunisation or perhaps move to the UK after missing the opportunity. England is falling behind the rest of the United Kingdom; in the rest of the UK, the take-up rate is 3% higher than it is in England, and it is important that we close that gap.

Media, and particularly social media, present a problem. When we look at the information that is available, we can see that it is easy for scarce stories to develop in the media or to be perpetuated on social media. When stories or misleading ideas not backed by any evidence get out of hand and people buy into them, it is very important that they are challenged.

A sense of solidarity is also important. It is very difficult if a number of people think, “I am concerned about the risk of this immunisation, so I will rely on the 95% of other people to have their children immunised and I will be part of the 5% who are otherwise protected.” We cannot rely on everyone else to do the right thing, because the proportion of people who do not take up the immunisation may increase to more than 5%.

Dr Dan Poulter: I wholeheartedly agree with my hon. Friend. When I was young, I had both chickenpox and measles. At that time, it was part of growing up, and many people who have had those diseases think, “It’s not a big thing; it’s not a big problem.” However, serious health outcomes or problems can develop from diseases that people may dismiss as not being terribly important.

In that sense, solidarity is vital; we must all take responsibility not only for ourselves and our own families, but for the wider community.

Media and social media concerns are just one factor. There are a number of other barriers to achieving comprehensive vaccination. The World Health Organisation highlights vaccine hesitancy, and identifies three Cs: confidence, complacency and convenience. Is it convenient to have the vaccination? Are people confident or complacent about take-up, with a sense of, “I’ll be one of the 5%,” or, “It’s not really a problem in our society; it’s not a big thing.” However, serious health outcomes or problems can develop from diseases that people may dismiss as not being terribly important.

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with parents to improve their access to evidence-based information. By implementing some, if not all, of those ideas, we will help to address the difficulties that are leading to a fall in vaccination rates, and make a positive case for why immunisation is good for public health.

This debate is timely, given that NHS England is currently undertaking a review of GP-led vaccinations and immunisations. The review was first announced in January as part of the NHS long-term plan, but it began properly only in the last six weeks. The purpose of the review is to consider how screening and vaccination programmes could be designed to support the narrowing of health inequalities, as well as to reduce complexity, improve value and increase the impact of the current vaccination programmes delivered by general practices. That includes reducing the administrative burden on GPs by simplifying the system, addressing the anomalies in the system that directly incentivise some vaccines but not others, and looking at how we deal with outbreaks and catch-up programmes.

The review is a perfect opportunity to assess how each vaccine programme is performing and to address and improve underperforming programmes. There are also opportunities to streamline the system and introduce a consistent approach. For example, some programmes, such as flu and pneumococcal programmes, include call and recall measures to boost uptake, but that is not the case for other programmes, such as shingles.

Community pharmacies have a really important role, and they could make an important contribution to vaccination. They are a convenient way for people to address their healthcare and receive vaccination services, perhaps without the need for an appointment. Many community pharmacies in England already deliver the NHS flu vaccination service, which has proved popular among patients. Following that success, would it not be possible to provide a wider range of vaccines in that way? That would help people to remain healthy, and it would reduce GP’s workload and the wider pressure on the health service.

Community pharmacies are uniquely positioned to help the NHS to meet its immunisation targets in England, and to help to ensure that people in more deprived communities receive the vaccinations they need. In contrast to other healthcare settings, there is a greater density of pharmacies in the most deprived areas per head of the population, making pharmacies ideal for bridging the gap in areas where people face greater health inequalities.

I reiterate that the UK has a strong history of vaccinations, from being the country that invented the first ever vaccine to becoming a truly global player in creating a healthier world for everyone to live in. However, we must take stock of vaccination levels here at home, and we must not allow complacency or misinformation to reduce the level of immunisation. We must continue to strive for the highest levels of immunisation, so that our children continue to enjoy living in a healthy society free from disease. I thank the British Society for Immunology, Save the Children and the Pharmaceutical Services Negotiating Committee for their help. I am glad that we are having this important debate, and I look forward to hearing from the Minister.

11.17 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Seema Kennedy): It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies. I am pleased to stand before the House in recognition of one of our greatest achievements in health. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Bolton West (Chris Green), my Lancashire neighbour, for tabling the debate. He is a great champion for his constituents and for raising science and health issues on to the parliamentary agenda.

Immunisation offers every child the chance of a healthy life, from their earliest beginnings and into old age. It saves millions of lives every year, and after clean water is the world’s most successful and cost-effective public health intervention. Our vaccination programmes are a cornerstone of the UK’s public health offer, and I know that all hon. Members here will join me in commending those involved in the delivery of our world-class vaccination programmes, which protect both individuals and all our communities. Our routine vaccination programme protects against 16 different diseases that, even today in developed countries, can cause serious long-term ill health, and even death, if not prevented.

The Government are committed to keeping vaccination uptake rates as high as possible. We constantly review ways to do that, and we are committed to ensuring that everyone eligible for vaccination takes up the offer. We should be proud that our routine vaccinations in England continue to have a high uptake, with more than 90% coverage for almost all childhood vaccines. That reflects the high levels of confidence that the vast majority of parents rightly have in our vaccination programmes.

Dr Whitford: The levels are above 90% for the majority, but does the Minister accept that the WHO advice is that the figure should be 95%, for community safety? We have to tackle this drop of even a few per cent.

Seema Kennedy: I wholeheartedly agree with the hon. Lady, who brings to this place her great expertise from a career as a doctor. The Government have a commitment to reach the WHO target of 95%.

My hon. Friend the Member for Central Suffolk and North Ipswich (Dr Poulter) is no longer in his place, but he made an intervention. He referred to mothers, but I think that all parents—mothers and fathers—have a responsibility to ensure that their children are immunised. I urge parents who are thinking of getting the last rounds of MMR vaccines for their children to do so. In every classroom, there will be children who are immunosuppressed and unable to have those vaccinations, so it falls to all the rest of us, as parents, to ensure that our children have their vaccinations.

Evidence from Public Health England’s annual attitudinal surveys, which have been run since the early 1990s, shows that more than 90% of parents trust our vaccination programmes and most people automatically get their children vaccinated. Regrettably, there has been a small, steady decline in coverage since 2013. That is of concern. There are likely to be many factors contributing to it, not just a single one. We are not complacent and we know that we need to take action now to halt the decline. That is why I am so glad that my hon. Friend the Member for Bolton West sought this debate: it enables me to outline some of the measures that my Department is taking.
The Department of Health and Social Care leads on policy for immunisation in England, and officials are working very closely with Public Health England and NHS England to take steps to improve vaccination coverage and reverse the downward trend. That includes better national co-ordination of our vaccination programmes; making it easier for people to access vaccinations; making information readily available to parents and those needing vaccines; and better training for staff to enable them to answer questions that parents may have.

In addition, we have data systems to ensure accurate information on the immunisation status of children and young people, so that health professionals can provide a “catch-up” on any missed vaccinations. We will continue to improve those systems. For example, the Digital Child Health programme, which includes the development of a digital personal child health record, will create a system that allows parents and healthcare practitioners to access a child’s immunisation history, improving the ability to give immunisations at every opportunity.

NHS England is reviewing vaccinations in the context of the GP contract, to ensure that GPs are properly reimbursed for vaccinating their populations and that the right incentives for increased uptake rates are in place. That is set out in “The NHS Long Term Plan”, published in January of this year.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bolton West asked about community pharmacies and the very important role that they have to play in our primary care. I thank him for his suggestion. The Government recognise the value and importance of the services that community pharmacies provide. We want to see them working with primary care networks to encourage more people to use their local pharmacy to keep them healthy.

With regard to vaccinations, I am aware of the success, which my hon. Friend highlighted, of seasonal flu vaccines. Indeed, the number of seasonal flu vaccinations provided by pharmacies between September 2018 and March 2019 was more than 1.4 million. I had my seasonal flu vaccine in my local pharmacy in Penwortham. I am sure that my hon. Friend, as a very responsible parliamentarian, had one as well. His facial expression suggests otherwise; perhaps he will have one this September. I will write to him regarding his suggestion. NHS England is currently leading a review of GP vaccinations, and I would not want to pre-empt its findings.

It is very important that our vaccination programmes continue to evolve. They are constantly reviewed and updated to reflect the changing nature of infectious diseases, based on expert advice. The Government receive expert advice on vaccination programmes based on decisions from the independent Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation. That includes advice on new and existing programmes and on which vaccines should be used. Recent examples of JCVI advice leading to improvements to our vaccination programmes include the extension of the seasonal flu immunisation programme to children and the extension of human papillomavirus vaccination to adolescent boys.

It is important to remember—the House will be aware of this—that if we do not continue to vaccinate, diseases that we rarely see in the UK at the moment will return. Examples of such diseases are diphtheria, measles, tetanus and polio. Vaccines are responsible for a substantial reduction in the number of those infections.

Let us cast our minds back to the early 1950s, when there were epidemics of polio infections, with symptoms ranging in severity from fever, to meningitis, to paralysis. At the time, there were as many as 8,000 annual notifications of infantile paralysis caused by polio in this country. Following the introduction of polio immunisation, the numbers of cases fell rapidly to very low levels. The last outbreak that started in the UK was in the late 1970s. Today, protection against that disease is included in our 6-in-1 vaccine, and owing to the success of the vaccination programmes, that disease and its effects are now rarely seen in the UK.

We should be very proud of our successes in the UK and of the public health benefits afforded by our immunisation programmes. However, as I hope I have made clear to hon. Members today, we are not complacent. We will continually seek to improve those services, seeking advice from experts and taking proactive action, to ensure that we have the best vaccination offer in order to protect the health of our nation.

Question put and agreed to.

11.25 am

Sitting suspended.
Local Bank Closures

[Joan Ryan in the Chair]

2.30 pm

Douglas Ross (Moray) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the Government response when the closure of the last local bank is proposed.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Ryan. I am delighted to have secured this debate, because the closure of our local bank branches in Moray has been an issue of significant concern for some time. I want to start with a roll call. Since 2015, we have seen 16 bank closures in the following towns in Moray: Cullen, Dufftown, two in Aberlour, three in Keith, two in Buckie, Elgin, a further two in Lossiemouth, two in Forres, Burghead and Fochabers. Those bank closures have affected communities in the north, east, south and west of Moray—no part of our area has been unaffected. The issue continues, with growing frustration for my constituents in Moray and constituents across Scotland and the UK.

In the UK, bank branches have reduced from 11,365 in 2007 to just 7,207 10 years later. In Scotland, between 2010 and 2018, a significant number of branches closed. RBS reduced its branch network by 70%, Clydesdale bank by 53% and Santander by 42%. Which? estimates that there are 130 communities in Scotland alone that are described as cash deserts. That means they do not have access to either a local bank branch or an ATM.

The banks have their reasons for doing this. They explain that footfall is decreasing, that more people are taking up online banking and that people can use different methods to deal with their banking needs. I disagree with that for a number of reasons, but an email I received from a constituent summed it up perfectly. The constituent comes from Portknockie, and wrote:

“I support you in calling banks to account. We know that bank branches are not equipped and not necessarily insured to deal with this. Bars and pubs in particular—on bank holiday weekends, say—will no longer be able to deposit cash locally, so that cash will be held on the premises, to what extent have the Government considered the security of the towns and the threat of organised crime? Bars and pubs in particular—on bank holiday weekends, say—will no longer be able to deposit cash locally, so that cash will be held on the premises, which are not equipped and not necessarily insured to hold that level of cash. This is an aspect that we have not considered so far.

Yes, the banks do have many reasons for suggesting that these closures are the right way forward, but I believe that this constituent and many more who contacted me ahead of this debate are absolutely right. People are not unaffected by these closures. A large number of people in our communities either do not have access to fast broadband, to allow mobile banking, or simply do not want to use it, but wish to continue the face-to-face contact that they value with their banks.

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this debate. His constituent also raised the question of the procedures and processes that banks go through before they disengage with a community. In the experience of my constituents and my own experience in Bridge of Allan, that is a tick-box exercise and nothing more.

Douglas Ross: I endorse and agree with my hon. Friend’s comments. I want to focus specifically on how banks approach this whole process. It could be done far better—indeed, it could not be any worse.

John Lamont (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): My hon. Friend is making an excellent case for why it is wrong that these banks have been closed. In my own area in the Scottish Borders, we have lost many bank branches, which causes great anxiety to many of the residents. When banks shut a branch, they say that there are mobile or other banking options, but many communities do not have access to mobile phone signals or broadband. Does my hon. Friend agree that the banks should be doing more, before they shut the branch, to ensure that all residents and communities are properly connected? The Government may have a role in supporting that, too.

Douglas Ross: My hon. Friend’s seat in the Scottish Borders, my own in Moray and many others across Scotland do not have adequate broadband provision to allow a suitable online connection, to which the banks are directing so many people. I will be interested to hear the Minister’s response to the point made by my hon. Friend.

It is right that we should discuss bank closures in the round, but this debate specifically addresses the point at which the final bank branch in a town closes. Sadly, we have recently seen that in Lossiemouth. Lossiemouth is not a small town; it is a growing town. The population is increasing, largely due to the UK Government’s investment there. We are putting £400 million extra in RAF Lossiemouth, which will be the home of the P-8 Poseidon aircraft. With that, there will be at least an additional 400 personnel and their families coming to the town.

It is all the more bizarre and upsetting that now, when Lossiemouth has this huge investment and is preparing for an increase in population, the last branch in the town should have decided to go—it closed last week. This weekend was the first without the branch and, as I will mention later, the ATM was also removed. In the first weekend after the branch closed and the ATM was removed, a town with almost 8,000 residents was left with no cash whatever. The two remaining cash machines in Lossiemouth ran out of money.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): I am sure that all of us here now have experience of towns with no banks in them. If a town known to be highly dependent on the cash economy, as many of our tourism towns are—this particularly affects bars and pubs—loses its last bank, people will be aware that cash is being kept on premises. To what extent have the Government considered the security of the towns and the threat of organised crime? Bars and pubs in particular—on bank holiday weekends, say—will no longer be able to deposit cash locally, so that cash will be held on the premises, which are not equipped and not necessarily insured to hold that level of cash. This is an aspect that we have not considered so far.

Douglas Ross: I am grateful to the right hon. Lady, because that issue came up when I held a public meeting in Lossiemouth, following the announcement that the final branch in the town would close. The local football club, Lossiemouth F. C., said that it had checked with
its insurers, who said that they would either increase the premium to a level that it could not afford or simply not insure it at all, because it would now not be able to deposit cash at the end of the night; the cash would have to remain on the premises. I hope the Minister addresses that issue, but we also have to put it to the insurers, because it is no fault of the football club or other operators in these towns that the banks are now closed and people cannot deposit money.

I want to return to Lossiemouth, a huge town in Moray, being left without cash this weekend. Denise Bedson of the Lossiemouth Business Association told *The Press & Journal*:

“The situation at the weekend was disgraceful. A lot of small businesses can’t afford card facilities. I know there are cheaper solutions but the phone signal isn’t always the best here for them to work properly. We’re trying to get more banking facilities here because the situation is very difficult”.

It was so difficult that there were reports of people going into the local store to buy one tin of baked beans just to get hard cash to buy. They said that they did not want or need, simply to get money from the store, because the cash machines were not working.

Councillor James Allan, my colleague, who represents Heldon and Laich, has been a great local champion for this cause for years. We have gone from four banks and seven ATMs down to just two ATMs. In a community the size of Lossiemouth, that is simply unacceptable. This is just the first weekend. We have serious concerns that this will go on further.

Mention was made of tourism and tourist businesses. Lossiemouth is a great attraction for tourists, with whom it is very popular. We have takeaways and taxi firms, which do not accept credit cards or debit payments. They will suffer as a result of this. Lossiemouth Community Council and its chairmen Mike Mulholland and Carrol Ralph have been highlighting the bank closures for some time; they also held a public meeting about them, following my meeting. The issue has been of considerable concern since the announcement was made last November. We knew that this was coming, but the banks that have deserted Lossiemouth and other communities across Moray, Scotland and the UK. I believe that they have to do more about it.

While I am speaking about Lossiemouth, the area in Moray that is most affected because it has no branch left, I also want to mention post offices. They play a vital role, but there are some limitations. I know how hard Tony Rook, owner of the post office in Lossiemouth, and his staff are trying—as he commented in *The Northern Scot* this week, they are doing their level best—but when there is a spike in use and they are away for the weekend, there is nothing that they can do to put more money into their cash machine. He has one of the two cash machines in Lossiemouth. It costs his business to have it facing outwards to the street, but he does it as a public service. It is a great service, but even with great efforts from him and his staff, we were still left without money in a Moray town at the weekend. That is something that we need to look at.

It is not just Lossiemouth that has been affected. At the same time as the closure in Lossiemouth was announced, there was another in Keith. I held a public meeting there as well; I was grateful for the attendance of local councillor Donald Gatt, as well as Paul McBain, representing the post office, and Pearl Hamilton from the Federation of Small Businesses.

When we consider the impact of branch closures or the reduction of ATMs, we often think only about the customers who want to take money out, but the small businesses in our communities suffer just as much, if not more. FSB Scotland retweeted my tweets about today’s debate because it has great interest in the matter. Small businesses are losing not only the branch that they bank with and deposit their takings at, but the opportunity for people to take money out and spend it in their shops. They are the lifeblood of our local communities, so it is unfortunate and deeply reprehensible that they are being drawn into this.

I also want to speak about the bank’s response. I have to say that its contempt both for its own customers and for local communities is disgusting. As the local Member of Parliament, I got a phone call about the Bank of Scotland’s closures in Lossiemouth and Keith, days before it even wrote to its customers; I know my MSP colleague did, too. It came to the politicians to tell us, “This is what we are doing—oh, and by the way, we will tell our customers after the bank holiday weekend.” It thought that they could wait a few days before even bothering to tell its customers about news of such magnitude.

The banks get involved in the process that has been laid down to consult and inform communities of their decision, but they never change their mind. It is a fait accompli—they have decided what they are doing. When communities rightly stand up against these cuts and removals to express their concern about how deeply damaging they will be, the banks turn a deaf ear; they are not interested, and they do not want to hear it. I have to say that I think their behaviour shocking and unacceptable.

**Jamie Stone** (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): The hon. Gentleman is making a most persuasive speech. When a local authority in Scotland wants to close a school, there has to be a proper public consultation process. Does he agree that something similar would be appropriate for proposed closures of bank branches?

**Douglas Ross:** The hon. Gentleman makes a valuable point with which I wholly agree. Like him, I have been involved with school closures as a local councillor, and they are not easy decisions to take. When we were proposing to close Cabrach Primary School in Moray, we had to have a full consultation, even though it had no pupils left at all—the final two, a brother and sister, had moved to another school. There has to be a full consultation with the community to close a school with no pupils, but a bank branch with so many customers that is so valuable to the local area can be closed when the bank comes in and ignores every view put to it.

My most abiding memory of Lloyds’s reaction to what it was doing in Lossiemouth and Keith was that it was not even willing to engage. I wrote to it when I quickly assembled the public meetings, which were attended by people from community councils, the post office and business associations. The meetings in Lossiemouth and Keith both had an empty chair for the bank; because it could not even be bothered to turn up, they face the public about its decision. I thought it only right to show the public that it was absent by leaving a chair empty.
People wanted to challenge the figures about reducing footfall or the number of transactions. There were several people in the community who did not believe the figures that were put forward. The bank should have either substantiated its claims and stood up to support them, or gone back to the community and said, “This is where we were correct, and this is where we were correct.” That it was unwilling to do that demonstrates its whole attitude to this crisis.

The bank’s next response is, “Well, we’ll put in mobile banking.” A town the size of Lossiemouth, which has gone from four branches to none, now has a mobile bank coming for an hour or two a week. We have a great climate in Lossiemouth, but it is not always sunny and beautiful; it is sometimes cold and wet, and yet we expect elderly bank customers to stand outside and wait while others go in and carry out their business. There are also elements of privacy that a mobile banking service cannot replace. It is wrong that we should keep hearing, “We are closing your branch, but we will continue to have a presence.” That presence is pitiful, and it does not match the needs and aspirations of the community that uses it.

As I have mentioned before in Westminster Hall, in a debate about access to cash, RBS in Moray has a mobile branch van called the Moray Rambler. There have been so many closures of bank branches across the north-east of Scotland that the Moray Rambler now has to ramble into Banffshire and Aberdeenshire to cover areas outwith my constituency. Not only have we a poor service, but it is being stretched further and further and towns are getting less and less time with the mobile bank.

Post offices rightly have a role to play that we all value. Paul McBain represented the National Federation of SubPostmasters at my public meetings, and he did so well. Some tasks can be done at the post office instead of the bank, but some simply cannot be replicated: transferring money from an account, seeking advice about bank accounts, opening or closing accounts, registering a power of attorney or grant of probate, making complaints or inquiring about savings, current accounts, credit cards, mortgages, personal loans or investments. There is a role for the post office and there are tasks that it can do, but there are many that it simply cannot. It is wrong for the bank to say, “We’ll put in a mobile branch, or you can use the post office as an alternative.” It is not a like-for-like alternative; it is misleading and wrong to say so, and we will be in trouble if we go down that route.

Research into post office usage by Which? reveals that only 55% of adults are aware that they can use the post office for banking—almost half of the population do not know that—and that 47% are unlikely to use a post office for banking in the future. I hope that we can change those figures; as I said in an Adjournment debate in the main Chamber a couple of months ago, we need to encourage the public to use our post offices. However, many people out there do not want to use them for certain aspects of their banking needs. Some 42% of people did not want to go into a post office for banking because queues were too long, while 32% believed that they were not private enough.

Stephen Kerr: The key thing is that post offices have to be financially viable. If they are to take on more services, they have to be able to make a living from them. That is a fundamental challenge to the existence of many sub-post offices.

Douglas Ross: I agree wholeheartedly. That is an issue for the Government, but not for the Minister; I know that the Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, my hon. Friend the Member for Rochester and Strood (Kelly Tolhurst), has been discussing it. I want our post offices to be rewarded for doing the tasks that the banks are currently doing, because they are not being rewarded at the same level as banks for the jobs that they do.

My final point about closures goes back to the figures on footfall. In Lossiemouth, we have been told, “Your nearest branch is in Elgin, which is not too far away.” It is not far away in mileage, but getting there can be quite difficult because our bus services are not as good as they once were. People are expected to get the bus from Lossiemouth into Elgin, but ironically the branch there is not as accessible: people cannot park very easily on the high street, so they have to pay to use a car park and then troop round to the bank. Customers of the same bank used to go from Elgin to Lossiemouth because it was easier to park outside, and now we have closed the branch that they actually wanted to go to. Again, that shows how ill thought-out these plans are.

I know that many hon. Members want to speak in this debate, but I will just highlight access to cash. I have already mentioned the scenario in Lossiemouth where there was no cash available over the weekend. There has been a decline in the use of cash, but research undertaken in 2018 showed that 73% of people used cash frequently—that means once or twice a week.

The next figure that I will cite is interesting: 60% of 18 to 24-year-olds use cash frequently—again, that is once or twice a week. I am looking around me in Westminster Hall; before my hon. Friend the Member for Angus (Kirstene Hair) came in, I thought I was the youngest Member here, but she has beaten me to it. My hon. Friend the Member for East Renfrewshire (Paul Masterton) may have a complaint to make about that. Generally, we think that younger people—those in their thirties, or younger—are more likely to use smartphones, other technology or contactless payment, but we are told that 60% of 18 to 24-year-olds still use cash. Access to cash is not just something that affects the older population; it affects everyone in our communities. Industry figures predict that in a decade’s time, cash will still be the second most popular payment method.

A further concern that was mentioned today in a press release from Which? is that 7 million people were unable to use a payment card last year because of IT glitches. We can encourage people to use different payment methods and move away from cash, but people will still be affected if there are IT glitches, and such problems sometimes cost them money. We need to bear in mind that in the last year, 7 million people were affected by IT glitches.

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): The hon. Gentleman is making an important point. Access to cash machines is also important for people who are on a budget. They like to withdraw small amounts
without being charged, to help them to budget, whereas better-off people may make one large withdrawal for the week.

**Douglas Ross:** The hon. Lady is absolutely right. Research into the issue shows that some of the lowest paid in our society will be most affected if there is an even greater reduction in access to cash.

**John Lamont:** My hon. Friend makes an excellent point about the importance of cash. There is a wider economic point, because many of the small towns that he represents, and many of those that I represent in the borders, are absolutely dependent on cash. In Coldstream, Hawick and other towns in my constituency, when the banks have shut and the cash machines have gone, many traders have noticed a significant decrease in footfall and sales. That undermines the economic viability of the high street.

**Douglas Ross:** I totally agree with my hon. Friend. As he mentioned Coldstream and Hawick, I am sure he will get two press releases out of that intervention—something he always does well in debates such as this. Our high streets are vital to our communities, but we have seen a reduction in the number of shops on them. If that continues, we will really suffer.

I will briefly mention banking hubs. They are an idea that we have to consider, and I want to hear what the Minister has to say about them. The idea is not a new one; I know that it was suggested as far back as 2002. Last year, I wrote to every bank operating in Scotland about the suggestion of looking further at banking hubs—I know it has been made by several politicians from different parties—and I have to say that the response was disappointing. Some of the banks ignored the suggestion, and others said that hubs were not right for them. Nationwide said that it did not believe it was in the interests of its members to enter into a branch-sharing scheme. Such a scheme might not be in the interests of Nationwide’s members, but it might be in the interests of our constituents and its customers.

We have to do far more to get the banks to work together. They may have some concerns, but if we cannot have the four branches that we used to have in Lossiemouth, let us at least have one hub where the banks can work together to ensure there is still a banking presence.

**Kirstene Hair** (Angus) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend for giving way and for bringing this important issue to the House. We have seen the starting up of a pilot business hub in Birmingham, whereby four bank branches have come together to help businesses. Does my hon. Friend agree that that shows that there is a mechanism for banks to do this, and that they just need the will to ensure that they help their personal banking customers just as much as their business ones?

**Douglas Ross:** My hon. Friend makes the point that hubs have been created before and there should be no blockage. However, the banks seem unable or unwilling to move forward on the issue, and perhaps the Minister can use either a carrot or a stick to encourage them to do a little more.

I will end by putting some points to the Minister and asking him some questions, and then I will allow others to contribute to this debate. I was interested to read a report from July 2018 by the Scottish Parliament’s Economy, Jobs and Fair Work Committee, which was chaired by my colleague Gordon Lindhurst. The report contained a number of key points, including that there will be an indefinite ongoing need for cash and universal face-to-face banking provision; that the access to banking standard, with its post-closure-decision consultation, is failing and a binding pre-decision consultation is needed; and that there is a need for the UK Government to research the issue properly and come up with binding statutory and regulatory conclusions.

I know that the Minister listened intently and understood the concerns of Scottish Members when he addressed this issue at the Scottish Affairs Committee this morning. I hope that, with some of the asks from me and other Members, the UK Government can make some progress on this issue.

I hope that the Minister will look at the access to banking standard and toughen it up, because some banks are not part of it. As I said when I read out communications from a constituent and others, there are concerns that banks are not adhering to the standard. I also hope that he will engage with the banks about banking hubs; the banks have too easily written off that suggestion rather than engaging properly on it. Although I accept that there are commercial reasons why banks choose to leave towns, I hope that the Minister will accept that the situation is different when a bank branch is the last to leave a town or village, and that that has a far greater impact than earlier closures.

To conclude, there has already been a devastating reduction in the number of branches across Moray, across Scotland and across the UK. We almost always lose ATMs at the same time, and therefore access to cash as well. We need to reverse that trend. Banks can improve their image—it is not always the most positive—by listening to communities and working with them, and not by simply leaving towns and villages. To date, I do not believe that the Government have done enough. We can also improve our image on this issue by working with communities and ensuring that they retain the banking presence and bank branches that they so greatly need.

**Joan Ryan (in the Chair):** I intend to start calling Front-Bench spokespeople at 3.27 pm. That leaves roughly between four and five minutes if each Back-Bench Member who wishes to speak is to have an equal share of the time that is left; I leave Back-Bench Members to manage their time themselves.

2.57 pm

**Marion Fellows** (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Ryan, and I congratulate the hon. Member for Moray (Douglas Ross) on securing this extremely important debate.

This is not the first time that I have spoken in this Chamber on this subject area. Last Thursday, we discussed a Treasury Committee report; the hon. Member for Oxford East (Anneliese Dodds), who is the Labour spokesperson on this afternoon, also attended that debate. The issue cuts across two Government Departments and I hope that they will soon get their heads together and sort it out.

As has been said, Scotland has lost more than a third of its bank and building society branches in the last eight years. New analysis from Which? shows that 610 branches in Scotland closed between 2010 and 2018,
and Santander’s recent decision to close 15 branches in Scotland will have a devastating impact on staff and local firms.

As we have heard, communities are devastated when local bank services close, and when the last bank goes it can have an unacceptable effect on local communities. In its report, the Treasury Committee said that “there are still large sections of society who rely on bank branches to carry out their banking needs.” As the hon. Member for Moray said, it is not only the elderly who need cash; everyone seems to need cash at some point during the week. If they cannot access it, there are real problems, and there is a deleterious effect on our local high streets and our local businesses.

The UK Government must step in and act; they can no longer argue that they cannot intervene. They made a similar argument about Royal Bank of Scotland closing branches, but we now know that the Treasury thought that it was okay to force RBS to pull finance from customers through the asset protection scheme.

The view of the Treasury Committee is that “the Government should make changes to competition law to allow banks to share facilities in order to maintain a sustainable branch network” and that “intervention by Government or the FCA may be necessary...to provide a physical network for consumers”, which is extremely important. We need people to be able to access cash. Perhaps we need the Lending Standards Board to be involved in this as well, to increase transparency and the potential for external scrutiny over branch closures. It could publish examples of non-compliance when people do not do the right thing through their annual reports.

Post offices are a subject in which I have taken a great deal of interest; I secured a backbench business debate on the sustainability of the post office network. Post offices have lifted a heavy burden when banks in their vicinity have closed. One sub-postmaster in my constituency told me that because of the closure of local banks, he was now having to work extremely hard simply counting cash, and he worked out that in one week his take-home pay was £1.37 an hour. I am aware that Post Office Ltd has increased the rates it pays sub-postmasters, but that increase will not come into effect until October of this year. It is extremely important for local authorities, communities and businesses that where the last bank closes, the Government do what they should be doing: supporting banks through banking hubs, charging banks to use those hubs and using any other means that they can find to do a good job and keep cash going in local economies.

3.1 pm

Paul Masterton (East Renfrewshire) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Moray (Douglas Ross) for having secured today’s debate. This issue is of real concern to my constituents, who have been hit by a number of closures of bank branches in recent years. I am a member of the Scottish Affairs Committee, which has done a lot of work in this space: we have done a bespoke short inquiry into RBS’s significant run of bank closures, and we are going to do another one into access to cash. I am sure the Minister will be sick of the sight of me, since he was in front of the Committee this morning.

I will touch a lot on some of the points that our Committee has drawn out through our inquiry, and focus in particular on the impact of bank branch closures—especially the last bank in town—on the local post office network. That network is often used by banks as a justification for abandoning a community and a high street. It seems to me that banks effectively want post offices to do their work for them, often at a loss, as the hon. Member for Motherwell and Wishaw (Marion Fellows) has explained. From evidence given to my Committee, we know that banks do very little to ensure the longevity and sustainability of the post office network on which they rely so heavily. In East Renfrewshire, half a dozen post offices have closed over the past couple of years for a variety of reasons. Just about every single one of those post offices was included in the so-called consultation documentation produced by a local bank as the nearest place for customers to carry out their transactions.

The Government need to set out a clear policy paper on how to tackle this issue, and reform the access to banking standard from a voluntary agreement into something with more legislative backing. They also need to do more to facilitate genuine alternatives to banks using the post office as a quick fix when closing branches. Post offices are not a replacement for branch services, and their staff do not have the training to act as banking specialists; my hon. Friend the Member for Moray ran through a whole range of things that they cannot do and explained well the lack of awareness about the post office. However, it is crucial to ensure the post office network is receiving adequate funding to deliver banking services, rather than post offices subsidising bank branch closure programmes, which is effectively what is happening at the moment.

I agree that banks need to look seriously at sharing space to keep a local presence; that is particularly important when the last bank leaves. If those banks still want to pass the buck to the Post Office, the Government should explore making them responsible for setting up and funding banking hubs. Such hubs could be located or co-located in post office branches in certain instances, but the post office branches themselves and the services currently available through them should not be seen as a replacement for banking services. The Government could raise the bank corporation tax surcharge and the bank levy to fund the provision of banking services in the post office network and a network of community banking hubs, especially when it comes to staff training. In 2019-20, those two taxes are forecast to raise over £4 billion. Of course, funding should also be available through fines collected for non-compliance with the standard.

My constituents living in Neilston saw their post office suddenly closed in March, leaving that village without any banking services whatsoever. The same has happened in Eaglesham, at the other end of the constituency. Post offices that banks used as excuses for why their branch was no longer needed are gone. Where are the banks? They simply do not care; as far as they are concerned, it is now the Post Office’s problem. Their responsibilities to the communities they used to serve are, in their view, over.

Surely, the least we can expect is that if banks want to pass the buck to the Post Office, they ensure that post offices are sustainable alternatives to bank branches in the long term. It is quite clear that for my constituents, they are not. As I told the executives of RBS, Bank
of Scotland, TSB and Clydesdale Bank when they appeared before the Scottish Affairs Committee, it is completely unacceptable for high street banks to rely on the post office network as a justification for abandoning local communities while doing nothing meaningful to ensure the continued survival of that network.

3.5 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate, Ms Ryan, and I congratulate the hon. Member for Moray (Douglas Ross) on having secured it. While I am always pleased to support any debate that the hon. Gentleman secures, I have a deep interest in this particular topic.

I used to come to these debates and talk about my rural areas and social isolation. As I did that, bankers nodded at me, all the while pushing on with their plans to close rural banks, which succeeded. The last banks in the Ards peninsula in my constituency closed over a year ago, although to give a bit of credit to Ulster bank, I highlight the fact that it provided a mobile bank and a customer adviser on a weekly basis. That has been useful, so some of the banks—one of the banks, anyway— took the opportunity to do something.

These closures mean that much of my constituency has no local branch. When that is paired with the fact that some areas of the peninsula are using dial-up internet, the isolation becomes incredibly clear. However, according to the banks, the numbers did not tally, and the customers could be relocated to another branch—how frustrating it was to watch that. It was fine until the closures started hitting the main town, Newtownards, which has a population of some 30,000 and serves the Ards peninsula. We saw the First Trust bank close, as well as the Bank of Ireland branch. Someone from Portaferry, some 30 miles down the road, has to travel to Bangor or Belfast simply to speak to their local bank.

I thank God for Danske bank, Ulster bank, Santander and Nationwide, which have carried out enhancements to their Newtownards branches. Those enhancements show their dedication to the local area, and I highlight them to anyone who asks me about those banks. I much prefer to work and do business with those who are prepared to have a local branch, paying rents and providing a service. Most people now are doing things online, which is phenomenal for the people whose lives are made easier by doing a lot online. My parliamentary aide is at that all the time—she is always on the app, moving her money around to cover bills, which is great—but at lunch time she goes down to Nationwide to lodge money in the children’s accounts; she has access to the banks and can do transactions there. How much more is this a case of enforced technology for people my age or older?

I will give Members a real example: in the six months before the consultation on closing one of the banks in Newtownards, a staff member had been designated to stand in front of the counter and ask people in the queue if they could help get them online and do their transactions online for them. The bank then raved about the uptake of online banking. That is a slight false economy when a staff member had to stand patiently with the customer, who got to jump the queue and get what they wanted if they had talked to that staff member. In addition, the banks began to say, “We have to charge a fee, but if you do it online yourself, it is free.” Explaining all that to the customer took longer than carrying out the transaction would have done, but that would not provide the same excuse to say that the branch had become obsolete.

I read a story in the paper at the weekend, which is a true story. I am rather loath to use the bank’s name, although anyone who reads The Mail on Sunday can find out which bank it was. The headline states: “As banks continue to axe branches around Britain and force firms to go cashless, this furious baker”— who is one of the bank’s customers; not a banker, but a baker— says that her bank “talked me into a pricey card reader… then shut down my branch”.

Wow! Listen to this one: she pays £39 a month for a debit card reader, and 1.85% of every transaction goes to the bank. If cash disappears, there is a danger that contactless card payment fees will soar. That is the bottom line and the unwritten rule: whenever they get control of your assets, they will screw you a wee bit more.

The next one comes from a lady in a village—this is an absolute cracker. Her bank boasts that it is “by your side”. It was so much by this person’s side that it closed down her branch last year. That illustrates what the issues are.

I have constituents who do not know how, or have the facilities, to carry out their banking online, and even those who do still frequent their bank regularly. People need that service and pay for that service; that must be the priority, not simply giving shareholders a bigger dividend. No one expects the banks to be charities, but providing a service to those who pay is not being charitable. Let us bring back the banks, the local branch manager and the forgotten ideal of being part of a local community. That is what banks should be, and very often now they are not.

3.9 pm

Bill Grant (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Ryan, and I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Moray (Douglas Ross) for securing this important debate.

It is all very well for the banks to say that people are required to move with the times, but there is a generation out there who came through school having been taught mental arithmetic, not IT skills. Not all members of that generation will be fortunate enough to have children and grandchildren fluent in IT speak, with a knowledge of apps and so on, to act as trusted advisers and able to direct them through the technological maze. Not all have good memories for the passwords required, and it is a regrettable fact of life that our faculties fail us with age. I am testament to that.

On a brighter note, I congratulate staff and pupils at Kyle Academy in Ayr in my constituency, whose pupils are learning about cyber-crime and passing on that skill to others, including small businesses and the elderly in the Ayr community. I congratulate them.

Online is a modern maze where, on occasion, even the most skilled might fall victim to scams. At a rural crime event in my constituency, it was highlighted how a farmer had been scammed when purchasing and paying via an online bank account for expensive agricultural equipment. Might it have been different had there been a bank branch open to conduct that business? The banks and the Government need to instil confidence in the user of digital banking services, whether that is in...
relation to the availability and basic reliability of the internet in the first place, or protection from the cruel, heartless scammers who appear to be able to read bank cards or secure an individual’s bank details. Is it any surprise that, until the banks and Governments robustly and timeously minimise, if not eradicate, those known risks, the public will remain averse to bank closures and feel that they are being pressured to move online?

The banks place great emphasis on the fact that shared facilities exist through post offices by virtue of the Post Office banking framework, which is an agreement with around 28 high street banks, supported by the Government. However, stand-alone post offices are virtually a thing of the past as well. Most are incorporated into stores and, again, privacy is often an issue. Worrayingly, some postmasters have contacted me, and I am sure many others throughout the UK, regarding the profitability of their business being driven down by the Post Office itself. Thankfully, the Post Office has been listening and in October we should see changes that afford greater support to sub-postmasters, which is to be welcomed.

I am delighted that a bank—the TSB, I believe—in the seaside town of Girvan has survived the closures, having stated that it was determined to make significant efforts to keep branches with low footfall open by reducing opening hours. A face-to-face presence remains, at least for the time being. Perhaps that is a model worth considering. On the negative side, the nearby village of Dailly no longer has a visit from the mobile bank, which appeared there for a couple of hours a week. I understand the Government acknowledge the valuable role of credit unions. However, I have constituents who remain aggrieved that banks are permitted to provide services through post offices while credit unions are not permitted to co-locate with post offices. Hopefully, the Minister will be able to review that somewhat restrictive practice.

The Government refer to the access to banking standard and have said that the decision to close a branch is a commercial decision for the management team of the bank, and the long-time policy of successive Governments has been not to intervene. Yet Members will remember that in 2008 the Government of the day chose to intervene when banks’ management decisions nearly brought the banks to their knees, so why not consider their stance and intervene now to extend the presence of the last bank in town?

It is very important that we endeavour to avoid financial exclusion and age discrimination. We still see ATMs and Link is working on initiatives to preserve access to cash, despite the reduction in the use of cash by some groups in society, but, as has been said, for those living on a pension, benefits or lower incomes, dealing in cash sometimes makes financial management easier. Too often, tapping a card or entering a four-digit pin number fails to register in the mind of the purchaser the actual spend building up until it is too late and they are plunged into unaffordable debt.

Will the Minister assure us that personal customers—particularly, although not exclusively—the elderly—and small businesses will not be prejudiced by the continuing bank branch closures and that choosing to use internet banking will be better protected from the impact of cyber-crime?
Very often when I am in a queue for a sandwich or a newspaper, I feel self-conscious as I get out my wallet. Invariably, particularly in London, I am the only person paying by cash, and I sense that eyes are gazing at me with a sense of bemusement. The transition is happening much quicker in metropolitan areas than in market towns and the countryside. The breakneck pace of change causes difficulties for the elderly, the disabled and, particularly, those on low incomes for whom cash provides the best means of managing a very tight budget.

Secondly, having ready access to cash is the main challenge that has arisen out of the Lloyds bank closure in Bungay last May. There are no longer 24/7 cashpoints available in the town centre. There is a cashpoint in the post office, but it is not accessible all the time, and when the extremely popular Sunday street fairs take place, there is a major drawback for traders without card machines.

It is also appropriate to highlight the emergence of a postcode lottery along the Suffolk-Norfolk border. In Bungay, there are no 24/7 cashpoints. Likewise, 9 miles away in Halesworth in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for South Norfolk (Mr Bacon), there are no such facilities. However, if I go 8 miles west to Harleston, in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous), there are three such cashpoints within 100 metres of each other.

That revolution is happening when high streets and town centres are under pressure and face the challenge of reinventing themselves. For that to be done successfully, it is important that business should not unwittingly be diverted elsewhere. Bungay and towns like it serve a large rural hinterland, from where many residents, once a week, come into the town to shop, go to the bank and socialise over a coffee or a meal. Take away the bank and they might go to another market town instead. To adopt the practice of King Canute and try to stop the change would, I sense, be futile, but we can manage that change properly, so that the vulnerable are not compromised and towns such as Bungay can compete on a level playing field with their neighbours.

3.20 pm

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Ryan. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Moray (Douglas Ross), who gave an excellent speech, logically and rationally explaining a situation that we face in many parts of the United Kingdom but which, speaking parochially, is very much an issue for Scotland. If my hon. Friend the Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous) thinks that people look at him strangely when he uses cash in London, I encourage him to try using a Royal Bank of Scotland £20 note. Recently I was refused the opportunity to spend my money in London—an issue that I took up with WH Smith. I got a good apology, which is only appropriate.

Since I was elected to this House, I have been involved in many campaigns to fight unwanted and unnecessary branch closures. In my constituency, Balfron, Bannockburn, Bridge of Allan and St Ninians have no bank branches at all, owing to recent branch closures, and Callander is down to its last branch. When a town is down to its last bank and that bank is threatened with closure, I strongly believe that it is right for the Government to act—and I say that as a Conservative Member of Parliament.

We had an anomalous situation in Bridge of Allan, which may be of interest. Clydesdale Bank and the Royal Bank of Scotland both closed their branches at the same time. Each bank justified its closure by citing the existence of the other branch. How ridiculous is that? They have now both closed leaving the people of Bridge of Allan without a bank branch, despite both banks stating that there would be one. That situation must not be allowed to happen. The Government must be prepared to act to remove that kind of justification, when two bank branches announce their closure at the same time. When Royal Bank of Scotland closed its Bannockburn branch, it justified it in terms of proximity to city centre premises—but guess what: it then moved those premises further from the customers. The branch in question happens to be very plush, but there are a few obstacles to getting there in the first place.

It is important that the consultation process that banks are required to go through should not just be a tick-box exercise. I am fearful that it is exactly that—a fait accompli from the point of announcement—and that any consultation is a completely pointless exercise. I might add that that could also be true when post office closures are announced. They are also, I think, nothing more than a tick-box exercise. I should like to hear from the Minister what the Government plan to do. I know him, and he is a very good fellow. There have been many representations, debates and speeches on the subject, and it is time for the Government to produce some kind of policy initiative, to do something about it.

The Treasury Committee has been referred to, and post offices are not a fair substitute for a branch of a bank. It is very unfair: many sub-postmasters in my constituency do not have the facilities or resources to become an alternative to the bank branch that once existed next door to them, or on the same street. It is not fair on the customers, or on the community that those branches served.

Another suggestion that has been made—and it is a fair one—concerns banking hubs. I strongly believe—as, I say again, a Conservative—that the banks should be encouraged, and perhaps more than encouraged, in the light of the earlier reference to carrots and sticks, to come together and fund the creation of a community banking hub. Perhaps that could be done in conjunction with the Post Office, but I do not think that just taking a laissez-faire approach to the facilities will hack it. The banks have said that the Post Office should be encouraged to take up the slack, and they have said they will support local post offices, but I asked one postmaster in my constituency what support the bank gave him when it moved out of town. He said, “I got a bundle of leaflets, so I could put them out on my counter.” That was the sum total of the support.

When bank branches are closed and the community is told that the banks will support it through local post offices, what is the mechanism for delivering that support? What positive encouragement is there for the bank to deliver on that? What will the Government do about the situations that I describe? Is it not time we came up with a policy to deal with the situation? I hope that the Minister will be able to describe fully what the Treasury will do—because this is not any old Minister of the Crown replying to the debate: he is a Treasury Minister, so we have great expectations. We need radical ideas now to make sure that vital banking and community
services will be available across the villages and towns of Scotland and the whole United Kingdom. The Government have a role in enabling and supporting that, and a responsibility to do so. I urge them to do it.

I cannot sit down without mentioning the people of Dunblane, who were told they would have a mobile banking service for a few minutes every other week. That is not a replacement for a bank facility. However, it is the kind of support and recompense that communities have been offered by banks that have deserted them, although the people of this country were not slow to step up to the mark and bail them out of the mess they had made. My colleagues and I will not forget that in a hurry.

3.26 pm

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): I thank the hon. Member for Moray (Douglas Ross) for bringing this important debate forward. Moments of agreement are rare, so when they happen they should be celebrated in a mighty fashion—[HON. MEMBERS: “Hear, hear!”] although the debate is not over yet.

I feel that I spend half my time in this place—I do not exaggerate and I know that others will share this view—bemoaning the stampede of banks out of our communities without so much as a backward glance. I represent a constituency where several towns have no bank at all. They are Ardrossan, Stevenston, Kilwinning—a town of 21,000 people—West Kilbride, Dalry and Beith. Kilbirnie’s last bank is having its opening hours reduced, and that is the only bank left in the entire Garnock valley, where there are three distinct towns with a collective population of more than 19,000 people.

My constituency has been hit particularly hard, so I fully appreciate the similar concerns expressed by the hon. Members for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Jamie Stone) and for Stirling (Stephen Kerr). In Scotland we have lost one third of our bank branches in just eight years. Research from Which? has shown that 610 branches closed across Scotland between 2010 and 2018. The recent Santander announcement of closures is the latest in a long line of such announcements from banks across the board.

The hon. Member for Stirling talked about consultation on bank closures being a tick-box exercise, and that is true. I remember the same thing happening in 2007-08 when there were, in my constituency anyway, mass post office closures. Perhaps naively and innocently—this was long before I was elected to this place—we had mass post office closures. The recent Santander announcement of closures is the latest in a long line of such announcements from banks across the board.

The hon. Member for Stirling talked about consultation on bank closures being a tick-box exercise, and that is true. I remember the same thing happening in 2007-08 when there were, in my constituency anyway, mass post office closures. Perhaps naively and innocently—this was long before I was elected to this place—we had street stalls and went door to door with petitions to move the banks and Post Office, but nothing changed.

This has to stop. The Minister will be aware that the Treasury Committee concluded that “there are still large sections of society who rely on bank branches to carry out their banking needs. A bank branch network, or at least a face-to-face banking solution, is still a vital component of the financial services sector, and must be preserved.”

The Minister will probably not agree, but I genuinely believe this: there was no UK Government intervention when RBS, which was owned by us, the taxpayers, announced a significant—eye-watering—closure programme, and I believe that the fact that nothing was done emboldened other banks, with no element of public ownership, in their closure programmes.

If the Government were willing to accept the closure of RBS branches, which they owned on behalf of the taxpayer—I listened carefully but did not hear them condemning those closures—then closing local branches seems to have been an option that other banks could employ almost without consequence. As a result, communities have suffered for want of a bank, and they continue to do so—we have heard much about that today. Mobile banks are not disability compliant, and their reliability is questionable at best.

The Government said that they could not intervene in the RBS closure programme—as the Minister will know, that rankled with many of us—and they insisted on leaving all operational decisions to RBS throughout the closure programme. As my hon. Friend the Member for Motherwell and Wishaw (Marion Fellows) pointed out, the Government apparently pressured RBS to pull finance from customers through the asset protection scheme. If the Government had tried to use whatever influence they could in the original RBS closure programme, I am curious to consider what effect that might have had. Would we still be where we are now? I think we might not be.

RBS is not the only bank to have closed branches, but it has certainly emboldened the others. As the hon. Member for Moray set out, the gaps left by banks cannot properly be filled by post offices, regardless of what we have been told. The Treasury Committee concluded that post offices “should not be seen as a replacement for a branch network, but as a complementary proposition”, and we have heard similar sentiments from every Member in today’s debate.

Over the past two years, I have corresponded with the UK Government and Post Office Ltd about the poor rates of pay for postmasters, and I am delighted that some action has been taken. We cannot have a situation where banks abandon our towns and the provision of some banking services is carried out by post offices, but those post offices are not properly paid by banks, which then rake in huge profits while some postmasters do not even earn the minimum wage—the hon. Members for Stirling, for East Renfrewshire (Paul Masterton), and for Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock (Bill Grant), and my hon. Friend the Member for Motherwell and Wishaw also made that point. Such a situation is simply not acceptable.

We are witnessing the demise of free cash machines—3,000 in the past 18 months across the UK—and 32 free cash machines a month are closing in Scotland. There is a stampede to charge people to use cash machines. The ATM Industry Association has warned that one fifth of Scotland’s free ATMs will start charging consumers in the next year, which can only be seen as a cynical move to force us to become a cashless society.

Just as bank closures have, in my view, been a tool to force people to bank online, so are banks now cutting the fees that they are willing to pay machine operators to provide bank customers with access to cash. Banks are attempting to put pressure on customers who are not acting in a way that they find convenient. What happened to the customer being king? Going cashless and banking online is the preferred option for some, but although some of us do not wish to go down that route, there are increasingly aggressive efforts to force us to do...
so at breakneck speed, as the hon. Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous) pointed out. I and my constituents who do not favour those options will not be forced to do that—the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) also made that point—and we will not be bullied into going cashless and digital. In any case, those options are not available to some people for a variety of reasons.

We need to move from a commercial model of access to cash to having a more utility approach, and keep cash sustainable for longer. Our cash infrastructure matters, and we cannot sleepwalk into a cashless society without serious consequences for many of our constituents and small businesses, which already face challenges if they are unable to bank takings or customers cannot access cash in order to shop on their premises. Not everybody has a debit card; as the hon. Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk (John Lamont) said, not every small business is equipped to take plastic. This issue therefore affects the footfall and sustainability of those small businesses.

I have corresponded with the Minister, and he accepted that broadband access is not good enough for everyone to rely on digital banking. I know he wants more banking services to be provided by post offices, but that is not the issue at hand. The Government, and the Access to Banking standard, must ensure that banks have a social responsibility to provide banking facilities to all our towns. Such services could be provided relatively easily through banking hubs, and there is no discernible obstacle to that option except—I am sure the Minister will correct me if I think I am wrong—a lack of political will, and the arrogance and intransigence of the banking industry. Our communities and constituents deserve better. Banks must face up to their social responsibilities and get their heads together to create banking hubs. There is no real impediment to that, and it is what customers want.

I urge the Minister to use his good offices to bang some banking heads together and ensure that their customers’ voices are heard. The Government have a role to play when the last bank in a town is closed. The Government have said repeatedly that these are commercial decisions, but this is not just a commercial matter. This is about social responsibility and financial inclusion, and I urge the Minister to reflect further on the strong feelings and concerns expressed today. Will he consider legislative proposals to ensure that our banks live up to their responsibilities to our communities?

3.36 pm

Anneliese Dodds (Oxford East) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to speak with you in the Chair, Ms Ryan, in this interesting and well-informed debate, and to sit across from the Minister. I was starting to get withdrawal symptoms because there have not been many statutory instruments recently, although I am sure the Government will rectify that.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Moray (Douglas Ross) on securing this debate, as I know that the issue has seriously affected many of his constituents and local businesses. For those without an intimate knowledge of north-east Scotland, let me underline that the communities we are talking about are often far apart. They either have next to no public transport, or it is of poor quality and very expensive. Local facilities are therefore incredibly important.

As the hon. Member for Motherwell and Wishaw (Marion Fellows) rightly said, we had a debate on a similar topic just a few days ago. It was mentioned that in certain circumstances an ATM might close on a high street that still has a number of different facilities. We are not talking about that in this debate; we are talking about situations where few facilities are available. This is not about duplication; it is often about the last services moving away. As the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) said, this is about social and rural isolation.

High street banks are an essential part of our financial infrastructure and they help to support local economies and communities. The bank branch network has been shrinking at an accelerating pace. Many statistics have already been given, but the UK has lost nearly two thirds of its bank and building society branches over the past 30 years. In 2018 and 2019, banks and building societies will have closed, or planned to close, a total of 1,080 branches, and 3,318 branches have shut in the past four years. Banks have been closing at a rate of nearly 70 a month. Overall, a fifth of the population lives more than two miles from their nearest branch—and a good deal further away in some of the situations that have been mentioned.

The debate has focused particularly on Scotland, where there have been a large number of closures, with RBS alone closing more than 200 branches—a 70% reduction in just five years. There have been similar developments across the country. In the north-west, 425 bank branches have closed since 2015, and even in the south-east—I represent a south-east constituency—more than 410 branches have closed since 2015, including one in Headington in my constituency. Such closures occur everywhere, and they often have a particularly significant impact on the most disadvantaged people.

The recent debate on the Treasury Committee’s report on consumer access to financial services emphasised the importance of local banks at a time when many people are not able to access basic financial services. That disenfranchises them from many different activities.

Research shows that in 2006-07, more than 1 million people had no access to a bank account in their household. Although that fell to 660,000 in 2012-13, it increased to 730,000 in 2013-14. We are going in the wrong direction in terms of access to basic financial services. We need to be clear that in many cases the process is leading to people who are already digitally excluded being financially excluded. That point was very well underlined by the hon. Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk (John Lamont).

There are also impacts for businesses, particularly small and medium-sized businesses. A YouGov poll showed that more than 68% of SME customers said that a branch was important, and 66% said they needed the bank branch because of the need to discuss issues face to face. The Federation of Small Businesses has done some interesting work on this. The situation in Lossiemouth when the town ran out of cash has happened in other places as well—it is not the only instance of that occurring. As the right hon. Member for Dwyfor Meirionnydd (Liz Saville Roberts) said, bank branch closures put a burden on businesses and organisations. Sports clubs were mentioned. They might be collecting a large amount of cash and want to be able to get rid of that cash to a bank branch, but they are not able to.
Worryingly, the situation is also leading to issues with SME lending. For example, the British Bankers Association pointed out that bank branch closures dampen SME lending growth by 63% on average in postcodes that lose a bank branch. That figure rises to more than 100% when an area loses its last bank in town. This is not just about inconvenience. It is a much bigger issue for many businesses, and is arguably part of the reason why we have not seen investment come back to the level we want.

The Opposition acknowledge the importance of dealing with this issue and have set out plans for a radical shake-up of the UK banking system, which needs a change to the law so that banks cannot close a branch where there is a clear local need. We believe that the duties of the Financial Conduct Authority need to be broadened, and that amendments are needed to the Financial Services and Markets Act 2000—particularly part 4A, which authorises banks to carry on regulated activity: the banking licence.

We would seek to amend the process substantively. I was pleased to hear a number of Members mention that, including the hon. Member for Stirling (Stephen Kerr). I will not go through all the details on how it should be amended, as others need to speak, but it is important that we see meaningful consultation. The hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Jamie Stone) also rightly underlined the fact that local authorities are often not part of the process, but they need to be.

The hon. Member for Moray and many other Members referred to the role of the post office network. There are strong grounds for believing that that role can be boosted, but not simply through it becoming the default option for offering services without any extra support. That is simply not sustainable. The Labour party has commissioned research to look at how a proper postbank network could be set up, how it could be financed and how it could operate. I hope the Government will look at that. The current approach is just not working, and we cannot rely on sub-postmasters who are already overburdened to deliver the services. A big part of the answer has to be to boost credit unions, as mentioned by the hon. Member for Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock (Bill Grant). I know the Minister is interested in that, but we need to do more.

As the debate has highlighted, it is becoming increasingly clear that we need to take action to deal with the shrinking bank branch network. The Government need to do more to invest in our communities and to support local high streets. Strengthening their approach to bank branch closures would be a straightforward way to deal with a number of issues. We need to take immediate action to preserve and build on our banking infrastructure to create a system that works and that serves a diverse range of customers and communities.

4.44 pm

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (John Glen):

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Ryan. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Moray (Douglas Ross) on securing this important debate. I acknowledge the contributions of all who have spoken this afternoon. I have listened carefully to the speeches, and it is good to have seven of my hon. Friends from north of the border here. I will endeavour to answer the points substantively.

I gave evidence to the Scottish Affairs Committee this morning on this very issue. Straight after this debate, I hope to make a speech at the Which? cash summit, where I will set out the work being done by industry, the Government and regulators to ensure that access to cash is safeguarded. I recognise that this is a very important issue for many of our constituents. In my own constituency of Salisbury, I have seen bank branches close and I understand how difficult that is for communities. We have heard some specific examples this afternoon of the distress that can be caused when the process does not go smoothly. I recognise there are different opinions across the House about how the challenge should be met, and I will address those shortly.

Undoubtedly, the fact that the retail financial landscape is changing rapidly, as more consumers and businesses opt for the convenience, security and speed of digital payments and digital banking, is a significant factor. Ten years ago, cash accounted for more than three fifths of all payments in the UK; today, the figure is less than three in 10—and that is anticipated to fall to less than one in 10 in nine years, by 2028. In 2017, debit cards overtook cash for the first time as the most frequently used payment method in the UK.

I am very sensitive to the point made by the hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson) that debit cards are not everyone’s choice; it is really important that we keep in focus the need to maintain access to cash. In 2018, two thirds of UK adults used contactless payments, 72% of UK adults used online banking and 48% used mobile banking. How we use financial services is changing and consumers have more choice than ever. It is an exciting time, but it is also a disruptive and potentially confusing time for our constituents.

Closing a branch is never an easy decision, but the decision will ultimately be a commercial one for the bank. The Government have been clear that we do not intervene in those decisions because industry is best placed to know what works best for its customers. I recognise that branch closures can be very disappointing for customers and the impact on communities must be understood, considered and mitigated where possible. I will therefore set out some of the ongoing work in this area—in particular, access to the banking standard and how it might be enhanced.

Douglas Ross: The Minister says that closing a bank is a commercial decision and the banks are listening to their customers. How can they be listening if they take those decisions prior to any consultation and if, when they are encouraged to engage, they do not even turn up?

John Glen: That behaviour that my hon. Friend experienced in his constituency is not best practice. It is not acceptable. It is very unfortunate when that happens. My job is to try to ensure that there is a systematic upgrade to the quality of the consultation and engagement from the banks, and I will now set out what is happening.

The access to banking standard has been noted by a number of colleagues today. Since May 2017, the major high street banks have been voluntarily signed up to the standard, which commits them to work with customers
and communities to minimise the impact of branch closures. The standard ensures that banks keep customers informed about branch closures, and that the bank sets out the access to banking standard and any alternative options for continued access to services. How meaningful that consultation process is has been raised, on the basis that it happens when a decision has been made and not prior to the decision. I am looking into that. I have written to the Lending Standards Board and will be meeting its representatives to discuss the matter further.

The options for continued access should include specialist assistance for customers who need more help. For example, the Lending Standards Board, which monitors and enforces the standard, has told me it sees evidence of support from firms to assist customers in understanding and using alternative banking options. I recognise that that happens in some, but not all, cases. Such support might include digital experts being placed in the relevant branches to demonstrate how mobile and online banking works and assisting those customers who wish to use that functionality, as well as making introductions to nearby post offices and retained branches.

I continue to be very supportive of the access to banking standard and I value the commitment it places on banks to communicate the next steps for customers when the decision is made to close a branch, but I am aware of the concerns that colleagues have expressed about the standard. I confirm that I recently wrote to the Lending Standards Board to seek reassurances that the access to banking standard remains fit-for-purpose and I intend to meet the chief executive to discuss matters further, drawing on the meetings I have had with various groups from all parts of the House and on the representations made so forcefully by colleagues this afternoon.

I turn to the Post Office. I was pleased to see the successful renegotiation of its commercial agreement with high street banks. That will enable 99% of personal customers and 95% of small and medium-sized enterprise customers to continue to carry out their everyday banking at one of the UK’s 11,500 post office branches; that is 91 more branches than there were in March 2018. I acknowledge the point that my hon. Friend the Member for Moray made about functionality and how not all functions can be carried out at the post office. That could evolve, but we already see aggregation of banking services at the sub-regional level when more specialist advice is required. The issue is about working out ways to solve that challenging problem. I am engaged in that work and am happy to explore that further with him.

As a result of the renegotiation, postmasters will see a considerable increase in fees for processing deposits, and the fees will rise further if transaction volumes continue to grow. An increase in fee income will help the Post Office and its network become more financially sustainable and will allow for investment in automation, training and security in post offices. Some £2 billion has been invested by the Government since 2010.

It is essential that more people know about the banking services offered by the Post Office, which is why I asked it to work together with UK Finance to raise awareness. According to a survey by Which!®, only 55% of UK adults are aware that they can use their post office for parking services; that statistic was made clear this afternoon by my hon. Friend. The point he did not make was that 77% of those who had used the post office for banking said they would do so again. We are on a journey of understanding, as people become familiar with what can happen in a post office. After that work, UK Finance and the Post Office found that awareness had increased and committed to using community outreach to further improve awareness. I will continue to take a keen interest in the progress of that work.

Although many customers are satisfied with the Post Office’s banking services, I am aware that there are still some outstanding concerns—they have been mentioned this afternoon—such as with privacy and queueing. I have therefore written to my hon. Friend the Member for Rochester and Strood (Kelly Tolhurst), the Minister in the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy responsible for postal affairs, to request that our officials continue to work closely to explore the issues.

My hon. Friend the Member for Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock (Bill Grant) made a point about credit unions and post offices. I welcome any feasible innovations in that space. The main trade body for credit unions is conducting extensive UK-wide consultation, and it will come back to the Government in September. I would be happy to explore with it how the solution he suggested might be acted on.

Related to bank closures is the issue of continuing access to cash. It is clear that for some people, cash remains their preferred, or only, method of payment for a variety of reasons. My hon. Friend the Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous) set out his experience, and that situation remains true for many people out of choice. Our financial system needs to cater for everyone in our society. Although it is exciting for many consumers, technology must not come at the expense of choice. There will therefore be no changes to our current system of notes and coins. We want to ensure that cash is available for those who need it, when they need it.

In 2015, we established the Payment Systems Regulator, a powerful economic regulator of the payments industry. Its objectives balance the need for competition and innovation on the one hand with the protection of consumer and business interests on the other. Through the creation of the joint authorities cash strategy group, we are acting to ensure a comprehensive approach to regulation in light of changing trends and preferences for cash. The Payment Systems Regulator is already examining the factors that affect the distribution of ATMs across the country. I was concerned by what happened in Lossiemouth; it is a good case study for the regulator to be examining during the early weeks of its work.

I welcome today’s announcement by UK Finance, the trade body for banks, that it too intends to explore key issues around access to cash, including the role of local areas and communities. The industry must continue to play its part, and developers should consider the needs of all customers as they design new digital banking products and forms of payment. We are seeing companies such as Square trying to improve the use of card payments in small towns. No one should be locked out of the benefits that technology brings.

I recently concluded a Westminster Hall debate speech with a call to arms to the industry to think about all consumers when developing its services, and I re-emphasise that here this afternoon. I welcome the innovations that banks are introducing to respond to changes in customer engagement.
behaviour as more of us choose to bank on demand online or via an app, rather than visiting a branch. We cannot reverse digital innovation, and nor should we, given the benefits it brings to our constituents—I acknowledge once again the point made by the hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Jamie Stone) about his constituents’ experience of connectivity—but we need to find solutions for the whole of the United Kingdom. Improving digital and financial inclusion is key to ensuring that vulnerable customers are not left behind.

I will keep pushing the industry—someone mentioned the carrot and the stick: both are required—to move forward and do more. I hope Members will recognise that I have responded thoroughly to the points made. I am happy to continue the dialogue, but I am working to engage on the specific issues raised and to secure the improvements needed.

3.56 pm

Douglas Ross: First, I thank you, Ms Ryan, for how you have chaired this debate; there was a subtle change in your demeanour indicating that I had spoken for long enough, and that ensured other colleagues were able to speak.

I am grateful to the hon. Members for Motherwell and Wishaw (Marion Fellows), for Strangford (Jim Shannon) and for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Jamie Stone); to my hon. Friends for East Renfrewshire (Paul Masterton), for Ayreshire, Carrick and Cumnock (Bill Grant), for Waveney (Peter Aldous) and for Stirling (Stephen Kerr); to the hon. Members for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson) and for Oxford East (Anneliese Dodds), the Opposition spokespeople; and to the Minister for a constructive, detailed and hopefully positive debate—not only for Lossiemouth, Moray and Scotland, but for communities across the United Kingdom that have been affected in this way.

The Minister said that the Government have made progress, which is welcome, but we can also agree that there is more to be done after this debate. His constructive response shows that the Government are listening. I have written down the actions that he is taking at the moment and that he will take going forward, but he will be left in no doubt by today’s debate that there are still major issues in all our constituencies that need to be tackled. There was mention of banging heads together and carrots and sticks: we have to use any and all means to find a solution to the problem. Although it is useful to have had this debate, talking only goes so far. We need action, and we need it now. I am encouraged by this debate that that will happen, but the pressure will remain until we can ensure that our communities can continue to be served by the banks they need.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved.

That this House has considered the Government response when the closure of the last local bank is proposed.

3.59 pm

Jim Fitzpatrick (Poplar and Limehouse) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the accountability and role of housing associations.

I am pleased to see you presiding, Mr Owen, and to see the Minister in his place. I am grateful for the opportunity to raise this important issue. I thank the National Housing Federation; Grenfell United; the Deputy Mayor of Tower Hamlets, Councillor Rachel Blake; the House of Commons Library; the Charity Commission; the Leasehold Knowledge Partnership; and Poplar Housing and Regeneration Community Association for their briefings ahead of the debate, as well as Jenny Symmons in my office for pulling them all together.

I do not believe that what I will say today is at all controversial, which might reassure the Minister. There are more than 1,400 providers of social housing in the UK, and roughly one sixth of our households live in a housing association or council property. There is clearly agreement that the status quo on oversight needs changing.

On Monday, the Minister and I attended an event at Speaker’s House to mark the second anniversary of the Grenfell fire. A speaker for the group, Ed Daffarn, made the point that the regulator had let them down. We all know that disastrous decisions were made in the refurbishment of Grenfell Tower that led to the tragedy, and Ed identified that a key issue was the lack of regulation.

In the wake of Grenfell, the Government’s Green Paper on social housing, released last year, promised to create “safe and decent” homes, “empowering residents and ensuring their voices are heard so that landlords are held to account” and “improving and speeding up how complaints are resolved”. Those commitments were very welcome; however, we are yet to see the fruits. One of the biggest areas that needs tackling in the sector is the lack of clear regulation and accountability for housing associations. Solving that problem would surely lead to the delivery of safer homes, empowered residents and an effective complaints procedure.

I often find it confusing what the exact roles of the social housing regulator and the ombudsman are. Where are the lines of responsibility? It is unclear what the demarcations are in the roles of the two bodies, which causes serious problems not only for residents who need to report concerns, but for me. Currently, the social housing regulator seems to oversee financial regulation and value for money, and in extreme cases consumer standards, but does not handle routine customer service oversight. That lands in the jurisdiction of the local government ombudsman.

However, residents can turn to the ombudsman only if their complaint is rejected by the housing association in the first instance. Even then, many residents do not know that they have that option. I have been informed that even if a resident does know that they can escalate their complaint to the local government ombudsman,
it can take at least a year for their case to be dealt with due to the huge remit covered and the high volume of complaints.

There is also the issue that two ombudsmen cover housing. The local government ombudsman technically covers social housing, but the housing ombudsman supposedly covers all housing. That leads to confusion about which body to turn to, and sometimes residents turn to both, which is a waste of time and resources. Labour’s Green Paper, “Housing for the Many”, makes it clear that the way forward is to have a single housing ombudsman who takes responsibility for the regulation of all housing, and who completely covers customer service and complaints handling. That dedicated service could deal with complaints in a shorter timescale, and would cut out confusion and restore authority to residents.

**Jim Fitzpatrick:** I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his intervention, and I will come to that point later.

For residents, be they social renters, key workers, people with shared equity or leaseholders, accountability and transparency are key. For public sector home owners or renters, responsibility for their home maintenance is generally clear, but in the private sector it is not. A recent example of such confusion is the Barking fire on Sunday. There appears to be a complete lack of information on who owns the freehold. Responsibility for the failings therefore cannot be allocated. How are residents supposed to feel confident in their homes when no particular company or individual will take responsibility for their safety and welfare? A clear system of regulation for housing association homes would go some way to making residents feel comfortable and protected.

**Tim Farron** (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the lack of regulation and transparency are key. For public sector home owners or renters, responsibility for their home maintenance is generally clear, but in the private sector it is not. A recent example of such confusion is the Barking fire on Sunday. There appears to be a complex lack of information on who owns the freehold. Responsibility for the failings therefore cannot be allocated. How are residents supposed to feel confident in their homes when no particular company or individual will take responsibility for their safety and welfare? A clear system of regulation for housing association homes would go some way to making residents feel comfortable and protected.

**Jon Cruddas** (Dagenham and Rainham) (Lab): This is an important debate. We had similar issues in Tower Hamlets, across Barking and Dagenham and Havering, with Old Ford, which was Circle Housing, and a notorious case on the Orchard Village estate because of a lack of effective regulation across the sector. At the same time, a number of housing associations increasingly saw their role as being developers, rather than fulfilling their historical ethical role of delivering for working people. Does my hon. Friend agree that the lack of regulation plays into the changing role of housing associations across the sector?

**Jim Fitzpatrick:** My hon. Friend makes a very good point, and I will come on to the role of housing associations and the change in their ethos. That will reinforce the concern that he expresses.

I hear all the time from constituents who are having trouble getting complaints about their housing associations dealt with. Issues such as above-inflation rent increases, unjustified service charges, unreasonable refurbishment costs and problems with repairs seem to be rife. The lack of information about tendering arrangements has also been a source of frustration. Residents often find it unclear who they can go to with their complaints, and do not have confidence that they will be given a fair hearing.

Accountability questions are all too common. In my constituency, there are many housing associations, many of which are very good. Some are average and some are poor. One of the best, if not the best, is Poplar Housing and Regeneration Community Association, commonly and locally known as HARCA, HARCA is a much-valued organisation in Tower Hamlets, going beyond its brief in housing to create community hubs and therefore maintaining a strong social ethos. It is also exemplary in its accountability. Its board has always had a majority of members from the local community, and it has created a tenant advisory panel with the aim of strengthening relationships with tenants and landlords. It was also an early adopter of the National Housing Federation’s “Together with Tenants” plan, again prioritising building good relationships with tenants.

In a recent consultation regarding plans for the Teviot estate in my constituency, there was a turnout of 81% of residents, 87% of whom voted in support of the plan. That demonstrates the high level of approval for HARCA’s work. HARCA also runs a resident-to-resident survey, where residents are trained to call other residents to get their comments on issues such as recent repairs, providing unbiased feedback for Poplar HARCA and involving the residents in shaping their local services.

Those initiatives have proved successful for Poplar HARCA not only in operating an efficient not-for-profit business, but in achieving high levels of resident approval. Its most recent survey, conducted in May, found that 83% of tenants and 75% of leaseholders were satisfied with the service. Clearly, involving residents in decision making at every possible level and seeking feedback regularly works in favour of both residents and housing associations.

However, that level of provision for, and investment in, tenants sometimes seems to be the exception rather than the rule. Housing associations are no longer obliged to have residents on their board. I urge the Minister to consider bringing back that requirement, as another means of making associations directly accountable to residents, and ensuring that executive boards have a local perspective.

At the opposite end of the spectrum to Poplar HARCA is A2Dominion, notorious in the housing world for its, at best, neglect of or, at worst, disdain for residents. The Daily Mirror recently reported that residents in Clyde House in south London are scared to sleep in their homes due to unsafe conditions. Thick mould covering pipes, water leaking into flats, vermin across the building and an assessment declaring it a “moderate to high fire risk” all appear in a new development.

A2Dominion is supposed to have the exact same social purpose as Poplar HARCA. However, residents are being ignored in their justified complaints. The lack of clear accountability means that it can get away with not taking responsibility for the necessary repairs and upkeep, while still charging tenants extortionate service charges. Associations such as A2Dominion need clear regulation, and residents need to know who they can turn to when they are not being taken seriously.

As the Minister knows, I have spoken several times in this place about fire safety in high-rise flats—not as often as him, of course—and the dangerous, highly flammable cladding that is still in place in too many blocks. If we
want to show that we have learned the lessons from Grenfell, we have to bring in stringent legal oversight, so that no further lives are lost due to its absence, in addition to shoddy, cost-cutting workmanship, poor maintenance, wrong materials and weak fire regulations.

Another point of consideration is bringing local government into a more formal role in oversight. Local authorities are well placed to understand the performance, or underperformance, of housing associations through the relationships between councillors and residents, and through public realm services.

Dr Dan Poulter (Central Suffolk and North Ipswich) (Con): The hon. Gentleman is making a good speech with many good points. On his earlier point about accountability in the context of having a more effective national ombudsman, given that we all, I hope, accept that social housing is a social good and, in many respects, a public service, the out-and-out free market approach that has been taken to its provision has not been effective and there is evidence of market failure. Does he believe that greater local oversight and giving local authorities a role in holding housing associations to account for how they treat their tenants are also important parts of improving the regulatory framework?

Jim Fitzpatrick: The hon. Gentleman makes a good point, which I am also trying to make. The Government’s proposal for a national regulator and beefed-up regulations are sound and welcomed across the sector—the House reinforced that last week during the Grenfell debate—but there is a gap that local authorities could easily fill. There could be local oversight through local authorities engaging with the housing associations that operate in their local authority area, as well as national scrutiny through the national regulator, so there would be a local and national partnership to hold housing associations to account. Some housing associations are getting so big that they are becoming far too remote from their residents.

On that point, local authorities have no official role in formal regulation. If councils were given a role locally, alongside a national social housing regulator that focused on customer service, associations could be held to account and complaints dealt with more directly. I would be grateful if the Minister commented on that possibility.

Another concern is the practice of under-the-table mergers between housing associations. Although the Government do not officially play a role in that, they have created an environment that has led to more mergers and takeovers of housing associations. Those have to happen sometimes, but as housing associations get bigger, whether through mergers or national expansion, their ability to be financially transparent and locally accountable reduces. That is a serious problem for residents who pay service charges, as it becomes less clear to them where their money goes. Bigger and more remote associations can also avoid being answerable to residents on other questions about repairs not being done, or not done to a high enough standard, or about costs going up or questionable rent increases.

My worry is that the bigger housing associations become, the more they become like money-driven businesses, rather than locally focused organisations with a social purpose, as my hon. Friend the Member for Dagenham and Rainham (Jon Cruddas) said. I am grateful for the commitments in the Government’s Green Paper, which was published last year, and for the matters raised by the Secretary of State in last week’s written ministerial statement, but we need progress to be made through regulation and legislation.

On a separate matter, I agree with Grenfell United, and the recent Labour party paper, that it is high time that the Freedom of Information Act 2000 covered housing associations, rather than just council properties, as mentioned by the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron). Residents and the public should have the right to information about safety standards and the like, to ensure that conditions and costs are monitored.

The Green Paper and the written ministerial statement offer better protection, more transparency and real accountability for residents in social housing, and I would be grateful for any assurance from the Minister that those commitments will be met as soon as possible after the close of the consultation that was announced last week. We want to ensure that our social housing lives up to its purpose of providing comfortable homes that are considerably managed, and that residents feel empowered in decisions made about their homes.

As I said at the start of my speech, I do not believe this issue is controversial or rocket science. There is support across parties and across the housing sector for what the Government are proposing—more transparency in respect of housing regulation, policing and enforcement—through a more powerful regulator. We need a strong commitment from the Government that they will move with speed and efficiency. As we approach the two-year memorial to Grenfell, some recommendations in Dame Judith Hackitt’s report have been enacted, but the Grenfell public inquiry will likely not conclude or produce a report until 2021 or 2022.

As I think the Government recognise, they need to take action where and when they can to reassure the public that their safety and wellbeing are paramount. A new regulator would be an easy way to demonstrate that determination, as would the other ideas I have suggested. I look forward to the Minister’s response, and I would be grateful if he considered this speech my contribution to the Department’s consultation on the matter.

4.14 pm

The Minister for Housing (Kit Malthouse): It is a pleasure to appear under your wise gaze, Mr Owen. I congratulate the hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick) on securing this important debate. He has been a consistent and persistent voice on housing issues, particularly the safety and welfare of residents, not just in his constituency but nationally. I understand his concerns about the accountability and role of housing associations, and particularly about the situations that some of his constituents face. I acknowledge the continuing role that hon. Members across the House play, as I know from my own experience, in resolving issues raised by tenants with their housing associations and other types of landlords; they rightly spend significant amounts of time trying to resolve problems when something has gone wrong.
Everyone has the right to be and feel safe in their home, and to expect their complaints to be dealt with effectively. The Government have taken recent steps to make sure that that happens. As the hon. Gentleman mentioned, we published the social housing Green Paper last year. We engaged extensively with residents to inform and shape it. After its publication, I held roadshows across the country with hundreds of residents in social housing and listened to them to understand their experience at first hand.

The Green Paper contains proposals to rebalance the relationship between residents and landlords, setting out the level of service that residents should expect and clarifying how to hold landlords to account when they are not delivering. We heard that residents want redress quickly when things go wrong, and that they want processes to be clearer and simpler. The Green Paper asks how we can ensure clear and effective redress for residents, including a question about the future of the democratic filter, which can delay the complaints process. I confess that when I was first elected to the London Assembly in City Hall, it came as a surprise that people came to ask for permission to go forward, through the democratic filter, to the ombudsman, which injected a significant amount of delay. We are grateful for the input of residents, landlords and other stakeholders through the process. We are assessing the consultation responses and finalising our response to the Green Paper, and I hope that we will publish that response shortly.

Alongside the Green Paper, we launched a review of the regulation for social housing to make sure that regulation maintains standards for residents while ensuring that landlords remain well run and financially robust. We asked whether social housing regulation focuses on the right things and whether the regulator should be able to take action more swiftly where landlords are not fulfilling their responsibilities. We are analysing what we have heard and will publish the outcome of the review of regulation in due course.

Registered providers of social housing must comply with the outcome-based regulatory standards set by the independent regulator of social housing. It has three standards covering economic regulation and four standards covering consumer regulation. The regulator takes a proactive, risk-based approach to enforcing the economic standards for private registered providers. It monitors landlord performance against those standards and, for larger associations such as Clarion, carries out in-depth assessments and publishes ratings for financial viability and governance.

All local authority landlords and housing associations must comply with the regulator’s consumer standards, which seek to ensure that homes are safe and of good quality, and that landlords deliver the right services. The regulator may take action where a breach of those standards has caused, or may cause, serious harm to tenants. Again, we asked questions in the Green Paper about whether that is the right threshold for intervention by the regulator.

Providers have principal responsibility for effectively identifying and resolving problems, and they are accountable to tenants but the regulator and the ombudsman have powers to step in and do the work that is required promptly, politely and fairly. The onus is on individual landlords, working with residents, to set their approach and timescales for handling complaints. I stress that if any hon. Member, acting on a constituent’s behalf, is unhappy with a registered provider’s response once their internal complaints process has been exhausted, they may take the matter further.

Social housing residents can also approach the housing ombudsman service at any time to seek advice, but for a complaint to be formally referred, it must pass through the democratic filter. Should the ombudsman determine that a complaint falls within its jurisdiction, it will investigate the complaint to determine whether there has been maladministration by the landlord. As I am sure the hon. Gentleman knows, the ombudsman can then issue a determination letter, which may include orders and recommendations to resolve the dispute. The landlord is expected to follow any orders within a specific timeframe.

All housing associations must be a member of the housing ombudsman service—a free, independent and impartial complaints resolution service. It is primarily the role of the housing ombudsman to investigate individual complaints from tenants. For example, it can consider complaints about how a landlord has responded to reports of a problem. The regulator meets and communicates regularly with the housing ombudsman, in line with the memorandum of understanding that has been agreed between the two organisations. This includes sharing data on providers, such as evidence of potential systemic issues with registered providers, and on other issues. The regulator will intervene should it find that a landlord’s failure to meet a standard has caused, or may cause, serious harm to tenants, and it is for the regulator to decide on the appropriate level of action to take.

The hon. Gentleman raised an interesting point on the plethora of ombudspersons. It is certainly the case that we will add to that number—as he will know, we have already pledged to introduce a new homes ombudsman. He raises an interesting question on whether there should be a general aspiration to agglomerate these ombudsmen into a single housing ombudsman, which is something that the Department has been thinking about. However, there is an argument about specialism and responsiveness in a particular area that needs to be addressed before we move to that stage.

Dr Poulter: My hon. Friend mentioned this earlier. From a tenant’s perspective, one of the main challenges is the issue of serious harm and how it is defined. The threshold for serious harm often relates to something that might cause a danger to life or safety. If we are talking about having civilised housing conditions that are free from damp and fit for human habitation, we need to have a lower threshold. I hope that is something that the Government will look at very seriously in the Green Paper and their further work in this area.

Kit Malthouse: My hon. Friend is quite right. As I said earlier, the serious detriment test is one of the hurdles that need to be passed before there is intervention. We have asked in the Green Paper whether this is at the appropriate level. I would just point out that there is a difference between detriment and harm. In a situation where there is the threat of serious harm, local authorities have powers to step in and do the work that is required.
to deal with any immediate threat to safety or life. We have enhanced the housing health and safety rating system assessment tool, which local authorities can use when they look at a particular property in order to detect whether there is a particular harm that will allow them to intervene. That has been very pertinent to safety, particularly on the cladding issue that we have been dealing with over the past few weeks. We expanded the test to cover the envelope of a building, so that the local authority can make such an assessment.

Jim Fitzpatrick: Have local authorities actually availed themselves of that power in respect of defective cladding? It is quite difficult for local authorities to step in, is it not?

Kit Malthouse: It is, and the bar for that is very high, because there has to be an immediate threat to life. With cladding, one of the things that we have tried to ensure is that everybody is safe tonight. I have just commissioned and received reassurance through a review that that is still the case—everybody is still safe in buildings. If interim measures are in place in buildings that have not yet been remediated, one hopes the immediate threat is receding. Nevertheless, the power is there for local authorities to use. That is not just the case in a situation involving cladding; it is available to them in any situation.

I shall move, rather conveniently, on to safety. The hon. Gentleman and I have both spent time this week with Grenfell United, and we will spend more time with the group later in the week. Safety is uppermost in our mind. When things do go wrong, particularly on safety, it is of the utmost importance that such concerns are resolved as soon as is practicable. Registered providers must ensure that properties meet, and are maintained at, the decent homes standard. The regulator’s standards also require landlords to provide a repairs and maintenance service that responds to the needs of tenants and offers them choices. The objective is for landlords to ensure that repairs and improvements are right the first time. When they are not, tenants should complain and have the right to expect that something is done.

I should point out that if hon. Members believe they have constituents living in properties with serious hazards that present a risk to health and safety, they can report that to their local council, which can inspect and assess properties using the HHSRS. Should the local council become aware of a category 1 hazard, it can intervene.

Albert Owen (in the Chair): I am sorry to intervene on the Minister, but we are expecting a vote very shortly. It might be helpful if he could finish.

Kit Malthouse: I will conclude very quickly.

The hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse raised several other issues. The first was accountability for safety. As he will know, we accepted all of Dame Judith Hackitt’s recommendations. In the consultations that we published last week, however, we are seeking to pin individual responsibility for safety on a named individual throughout the process—from design, through construction and management—so that there is clear accountability.

The hon. Gentleman quite rightly raised the issue of the residents’ voice, which is something that I heard consistently on the roadshows. Again, this is a big part of both the Hackitt review and our social housing Green Paper, because a lot of residents feel that either they are excluded from the conversation in a committee, or it is just not happening at all. We already have a group of housing associations that stepped forward to look at best practice in this area, and they are working away at the moment.

Finally, the hon. Gentleman raised freedom of information. There is a technical issue with freedom of information: the Office for National Statistics tends to classify organisations that are subject to freedom of information as being part of the Government, hence their debt moves on to the national balance sheet. Given that housing associations have something like £72 billion-worth of debt, that would make a fairly significant dent on our national accounts. Having said that, one of the issues that we will, I hope, address in the social housing Green Paper—when it eventually emerges—is transparency.

One of the key issues that Grenfell United has raised with me again and again is that the group has asked for information and has just not been given it. We think all those organisations—they are fundamentally not for profit, but serve the public and their tenants—have a duty to be as transparent as they can, subject to commercial sensitivities. That is something we hope to embed when the social housing Green Paper reforms come to light.

I thank hon. Members for their participation; it has been very useful. I will take into account the hon. Gentleman’s submission to our general consultation. As he knows, we have stood shoulder to shoulder in trying to reach the reforms we need to ensure that everybody is safe and well served in their homes.

Question put and agreed to.

4.27 pm

Sitting suspended for a Division in the House.
Public Health: County Durham

4.40 pm

Mr Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered public health in County Durham.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Owen. I am pleased to have secured this debate, but it is unfortunate that we have to have a debate on public health to highlight the effects that the Government’s cuts have on one of the poorest counties in our nation. I thank the men and women of the NHS, those who work in public health for the county council, and the voluntary and community sectors, which are part of the matrix of support for delivering in County Durham not only general healthcare, but, importantly public health.

In recent years, there has been debate about Government funding not just in health, but in local government and other areas. That debate starts from the premise that everywhere is the same, so a fair funding formula spreads the jam evenly around the country, but I am sorry—that is just not the case. Deprivation and need are factors that must be taken into consideration. In local government funding, fire service funding and police funding, need and poverty have been removed as determinants.

County Durham is a large rural county of 525,000 people. It faces some unique issues on health, partly because of the legacy of the county’s industrial past of coalmining and heavy industry, which means a high incidence of diseases associated with those industries, such as respiratory diseases, which put particular demands on the health service.

We also have a legacy of rapid deindustrialisation in the 1980s, when the hearts of many of the coalmining and steel communities across County Durham were ripped out by the policies of the Thatcher Government. That legacy remains in terms of hopelessness, drug and alcohol abuse, obesity and smoking, as well as the poverty that goes with all that. Previously, I have described County Durham as a rural county with urban problems, but those urban problems are sometimes ignored because of County Durham’s rurality.

We also have a growing elderly population. In the period to 2035, the number of people aged 65-plus will rise by 31%, and the number of people aged 85-plus will rise by 82%. That puts particular demand on the health service at all levels, in both the community and the acute sectors. Life expectancy in Durham is 78.3 years for men and 81.4 years for women. I will mention two other counties, and allude to the reasons for doing that later in my remarks: in Surrey, life expectancy is 81.5 years for men and 81.4 years for women, while in Hertfordshire, it is 81 years for men and 84.2 years for women.

The figures for healthy life expectancy, which indicates the age at which people develop serious health concerns, are even worse. In County Durham, they are 58.9 years for men and 58.7 years for women, whereas in Surrey, they are 68.3 years for men and 68.7 years for women, and in Hertfordshire, 64.9 years for men and 65.9 years for women. People in County Durham who get long-term health issues get them sooner than people in more affluent areas, which leads to demand on our health service. We are always told by the Government that we need to stop people using the health service to reduce the demand placed on it, but unless we tackle some of the underlying causes of the problem that pressure will continue.

Responsibility for public health funding was transferred from the Department of Health and Social Care to local government in 2013-14. I supported that move because public health is best delivered locally. The budget devoted to County Durham in 2013-14 was £40.5 million, based on the assessment of health needs by the primary care trust, which was abolished under the same legislation that introduced the transfer of responsibilities. To give credit to County Durham, it has used that money effectively, with services commissioned both directly by the county council and externally by private and third-sector organisations.

As with many things, however, devolution of responsibility for public health came with a sting in 2016, when the budget was reduced by 12.8%. That was part of George Osborne’s strategy, in a host of areas, to devolve money locally and tell the local authority to decide where the cuts would come. He could then stand back and say, “That decision has to be made locally.” But that misses the point. By sleight of hand, he sought to give the idea that somehow he had no responsibility for the cuts when he had top-sliced the budgets.

To be fair to County Durham, its public health priorities were the right ones to tackle. The funding was directed towards the control of tobacco and cessation of smoking, teenage pregnancies, obesity and weight reduction, mental health—an issue close to my heart—and improved dental services. I do not know whether the Minister is aware of this, but when I was first elected in 2001, certain areas of my constituency had no access to dental services at all. That has changed—not since 2010, I hasten to add, but certainly under the last Labour Government.

County Durham also targeted drug and alcohol addiction. I give it credit for the work that it has done on that. In the light of the recent confessions of the Conservative party leadership contenders, I think that they could take note of the available drug and alcohol services. However, unlike those middle-class people who have confessed to drug use, the young people we are talking about will not go on to glittering careers in the media or elsewhere. They will be pushed into a cycle of poverty and desperation at local level, and will add to our shared tax burden, because their demand on health, police and other services will increase. I always look at public health as an investment in our local communities to ensure not only that we have good public health outcomes, but that we reduce demand elsewhere in the system.

Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): Before my right hon. Friend moves on to the next section of his speech, I want to congratulate him on securing this important debate. What shocks me is the fact that in Woodhouse Close in my constituency, the healthy life expectancy is 10 years lower than that in Barnard Castle, yet those two places are only 10 miles apart. The notion of cutting public health funding seems grotesque.

Mr Jones: My hon. Friend is correct. She highlights that example in County Durham, but there are many more between the more affluent areas and the pockets of poverty. They have been there since the 1980s and
they need to be addressed. I am passionate about this issue; the idea that where someone lives should determine how long they live, in a wealthy country such as ours, is wrong. We should be able to tackle that in this day and age.

The new funding formula, ironically called the fair funding formula—trades description comes to mind—is based on the premise, pushed mainly by a lot of Conservative Members, that somehow the needs of individuals in health and other areas are the same across the nation. That is just not the case. The methodology put forward by the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government means that County Durham will lose 38% of its existing budget—that is £18 million a year. It is the worst loser in this process, because the dedicated, ring-fenced public health budget is being abolished. It is being pushed in terms of the business rate retention scheme, which concerns me because it means that there will be areas where councils—I will refer to two in a minute—that get a budget increase will have no duty at all to ring fence that money and put it into public health. That is a retrograde step.

County Durham has achieved a lot: smoking is 22% down and teenage pregnancy is down to a level that is no longer statistically different from national averages. That certainly was not the case when I was first elected in 2001. We have made great strides getting cardiac mortality down from 31 deaths per 100,000 in 2001 to 5.7 deaths per 100,000 by 2015. A lot of effort has gone into addressing suicide rates, particularly among men. That is a credit to multi-agency work, including the police, the voluntary community sector and others. We have a good-news story in the sense that we have a good partnership-working approach in County Durham, yet the Government want to take that budget away.

People ask, “Why can’t it be made up from elsewhere in the council budget?” This is a county council that has had its budget slashed by nearly £240 million since 2010. It is due to lose another chunk of funding under the so-called local government funding formula. The scandalous situation, and the reason I mentioned Surrey earlier, is that, while County Durham will have its budget cut by 38%, Surrey County Council’s budget will be increased by £14.4 million a year, and Hertfordshire’s by £12.6 million a year. It cannot be right—I will give some reasons in a minute—that money is being moved from deprived areas such as County Durham in the north-east to some of the most affluent areas in the United Kingdom. The life expectancy and other figures that I mentioned earlier are not comparable. That is not a fair way of distributing that money.

It is not just County Durham that is affected; the north-east loses some £40 million under the proposals, in some of the most deprived parts of this country. Gateshead, for example, loses 12.44% of its budget; Redcar and Cleveland loses more than 27%; South Tyneside, one of the most deprived parts of the region, loses 29%; and Sunderland loses 24%. That will not address health inequalities and stop people going into the health service; the cuts to the most deprived areas cannot be right.

There is a deliberate policy—not just here, but in other areas—of moving the central Government grants or funding formulas to benefit mainly Conservative-voting southern areas. That is the worst example of pork barrel politics. The Conservative party leadership contenders talk about one-nation conservatism. If this is one-nation conservatism, they can keep it. They will have a direct effect on the ability of healthcare professionals to provide services. It is not acceptable to go backwards on smoking cessation and drug treatment.

What has been going on? The county council has lobbied; it has written to the Minister, met Public Health England and worked with other local authorities not just in the north-east but elsewhere, such as Blackpool Council, which is also affected. It has contributed to the fair funding review. It is not just politicians on the Labour county council; the health and wellbeing boards, the police and crime commissioner, and the local NHS trusts have all argued that this is not correct, because they see what is coming down the road. If these short-sighted cuts take place, the demand on local acute services will go up—exactly what the Government and NHS England want to avoid. That disjointed approach beggars belief.

What do we want in County Durham? We want and need a clear commitment to public health. That is referred to in the NHS forward plan, but with no funding commitment or power to ensure that local councils deliver good-quality public health. We need a form of funding that reflects need. We also need a clarification on timetable. I understand that a decision is being kicked right back to the spending review. When the spending review will take place, given the chaos in the Conservative party, I do not know.

There is real pressure on the county council and other bodies because they have to let contracts—the current contracts come to an end in March next year. If there is no clarification by the end of this year, that will not leave much time for those organisations not only to tender but to let those contracts. That will lead to a lot of organisations worrying about their future. A lot of public health is delivered by the local voluntary community sectors. They rely on that, and they do a fantastic job. We cannot have money deliberately moved to areas of prosperity. I challenge the Minister to conduct an impact assessment on the effects of the cuts, to highlight those effects.

It does not surprise me what the Government are doing because they have done it in every other area, particularly local government funding. I do not question the commitment of the Minister to good-quality public health, but there is a disconnect in relation to the funding formula and the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government. On 7 January, I asked the Health Secretary directly about the issues concerning County Durham. He said:

“That is obviously not right. Indeed, there is a whole section of the plan on reducing health inequalities, which is extremely important.”—[Official Report, 7 January 2019; Vol. 652, c. 77.]

He might recognise the importance of public health, but MHCLG does not. That is not a very good example of joined-up government.

This is not charity; it is an investment, not just in the lives and wellbeing of individual constituents in County Durham but in the future of the country. Unless we tackle some of these health inequalities through good public health, our efforts to relieve the pressures on our health service will come to nothing. In a statement on
If these cuts go through, those words will be pretty hollow, because County Durham will be left behind.

5 pm

**Phil Wilson** (Sedgefield) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Owen. I congratulate my hon. Friend—

**Mr Kevan Jones**: Right honourable.

**Phil Wilson**: He is my right hon. Friend, as he reminds me. I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for North Durham (Mr Jones) on securing this timely debate. He has been a real campaigner on this issue in County Durham for many years, and I know he takes a real interest in the public health issues we face in Durham.

The backdrop to the debate is this: we face cuts to public health provision in the north-east of England, primarily in County Durham, at the same time as we see a parade of candidates to be leader of the Conservative party, virtually all of whom want to cut taxes by billions of pounds. I am beginning to wonder where exactly the money will come from for any kind of public sector provision. Those claims of future tax cuts will probably end up being unfunded after Brexit, considering that the pot of tax money for the public sector will be reduced anyway.

As my right hon. Friend said, we may face cuts to public health services of around £18 million in Durham. I reiterate what he said about Surrey and Hertfordshire: under the new formula, there will be a £14.4 million increase for Surrey and a £12.6 million increase for Hertfordshire. That cannot be right when we consider the problems we have with health and healthcare provision in Durham. Sedgefield grew up, as a community, on coal. The number of men who worked down the collieries and are still alive today but have ailments related to that industry, such as lung disease and arthritis, just goes to prove that there is a requirement not to cut funding but to increase it.

If we look at random at some areas of health, we see that the figures for Sedgefield are worse than the national average in all of them. It has higher than the national average cases of dementia, patients on antidepressant drugs, patients on painkillers, asthma sufferers, people with high blood pressure, people with depression—the list goes on and on. We are talking about a formula devised by algorithm rather than by listening to what healthcare professionals say the county needs. People in Durham can expect to live a decent life in good health for seven years less than people in Surrey and nine years less than people in Hertfordshire.

Great strides have been made over the years in the use of the public health grant in County Durham. For example, the smoking rate has reduced from 22% to 14%. However, smoking during pregnancy is still an issue and still above the national average. About 20% of the people who live in Durham—I think that is about 114,000 people—are under 19. They should all be due some kind of safeguarding provision. If the cuts go ahead, will we have the health visitors to provide that?

The cuts will affect the safeguarding of young people. If drug and alcohol services are reduced, the police will have to deal with an even greater problem of rising crime.

The chief executive of the Tees, Esk and Wear Valleys NHS mental health trust came to see me about the cuts a couple of weeks ago. Because of cuts to public health, fewer and fewer health visitors and school nurses are going to schools and people’s homes. Because that provision is not there, the trust has to see people it would not otherwise have seen because they would have been seen at home or school. Its provision for people with mental health problems is being put under more and more stress. The cuts are impacting on services other than those provided through public health funding.

One thing for which public health services have mandatory responsibility is health visiting services for those under the age of five. The breastfeeding initiation rate in County Durham is 59%, compared with 74% in England as a whole. Health visitors play a pivotal role in helping and encouraging women to continue to breastfeed their babies until they are at least six months old. Public Health England guidance acknowledges: “Mothers who are young, white, from routine and manual professionals and who left education early are least likely to breastfeed.”

Cutting the public health grant to an area in which many women fit that profile and which is already way behind on breastfeeding rates would once again penalise an area with real need.

Then we have obesity. In the fight to keep the population healthy and active, healthy weight is of core importance to the public health agenda. An estimated 14% of adults on GP registers across the Sedgefield constituency are obese, with the figure in some areas as high as 19%. Five of the 15 neighbourhoods with the highest rates of obesity are in County Durham. In the south-east, which may end up with increased public health provision, those rates are in single digits—around 8%, if not less. In Richmond Park, the figure is 3.6%.

The common theme in all this is that if we cut public health provision in our communities, other providers will be affected. Those providers, which otherwise would not have had to provide those services, will end up doing more and more. The mental health trust told me that case loads are skyrocketing for some of its workers. How, for example, will they be able to look after young people with mental health issues that are not picked up in the early years or when someone is still in education? Those young people will be passed along the road to mental health trusts, which will not be able to cope because they, too, face cuts. That needs to be addressed.

**Mr Kevan Jones**: Does my hon. Friend agree that, especially in mental health, the outcomes for an individual are better if we intervene early, at a young age, rather than leaving problems untreated for many years?

**Phil Wilson**: That is absolutely right, and that is an issue that the mental health trust raised. If those issues are picked up in the early years or when someone is still at school, they can be resolved. Leaving them just puts extra strain on the mental health trusts in the area.

I want to end on a positive note. I had some schoolchildren in Parliament yesterday from the primary schools in Ferryhill and Chilton. Cleves Cross Primary
School in Ferryhill has a whole host of initiatives around mental health, eating properly and so on. Around the village, it is setting up edible walkways: instead of flower beds, it is planting vegetables, which people can pick when they mature. It is great that schools are coming up with those great initiatives, but if the same thing is to happen in schools across County Durham, there needs to be central provision from public health services.

For wellbeing, there are initiatives to make sure that children have meals together with their families, and to ensure that if there are problems, other children and friends from school are invited along to share those meals. Such initiatives for those aged seven to 10 bode well for the future, and the public health service in Durham needs to look at them, but they must be funded.

We also need to think about how we develop best practice, so that we see such initiatives not just in Ferryhill and Chilton but in Consett, Barnard Castle, Durham city, Esh Winning and Easington—all over County Durham. There needs to be some strategy. As my right hon. Friend said, we need some kind of audit or impact assessment of what cuts to public health mean to areas like ours. What is the reasoning behind making cuts in Durham, where services are needed, and increasing funding in places such as Surrey and Hertfordshire, where they will not be?

Dr Roberta Blackman-Woods (City of Durham) (Lab): May I say what a pleasure it is to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Owen? I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for North Durham (Mr Jones) for bringing forward this important debate. In 2013, there was a general welcome for the transfer of public health funding to local government, because it meant that public health and addressing public health issues could be integrated into the council’s service delivery objectives to better promote public health objectives.

Under the last Labour Government, the public health team in County Durham has done a good job, despite facing the hugely complex health issues discussed in some detail by my right hon. Friend the Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson) and I will take up in the coming weeks.

Mr Kevan Jones: Under the last Labour Government, my hon. Friend, along with my hon. Friend the Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson), pioneered a free school meals initiative. Is she alarmed that, as I learned yesterday, the national school breakfast programme, which costs only £12 million nationally and affects quite a few schools—primary schools in particular—in her constituency, my constituency and other parts of County Durham, has still not had its funding guaranteed for next year?

Dr Blackman-Woods: My right hon. Friend makes an important point, which I am sure my hon. Friend the Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson) and I will take up in the coming weeks. That is an indication of how little the Government seem to be concerned about the children growing up in poor households.

Let us look at the Durham situation. The starkest indicator is the seven-year healthy life expectancy gap between females in Durham, currently at 59, and those in Hertfordshire, where it is 66, and Surrey, where it is 68. That gives rise to the question of why the Government are transferring resources from County Durham to Surrey and Hertfordshire. I know the Minister is new to the brief, and it would be helpful to get an explanation of why the Government think that is a good idea, because we have not had one so far. The appalling health inequality is compounded by overall life expectancy figures, which for women are 81 in Durham compared with 84 for Hertfordshire and Surrey. There is a similar gap for men.

Let us look at other measures. Suicide rates in County Durham were above the national average, with 20.6 deaths per 100,000 of the population for males. On mental health, the rate of young people admitted to hospital because of self-harm is significantly above the national average. On alcohol, 33.8% of people in County Durham drink more than the low-risk guidelines recommended, and 290 people died due to alcohol-related problems last year. There were also 12,500 hospital admissions and 108 road traffic accidents. That suggests a significant problem that needs to be addressed.
Furthermore, the percentage of mothers smoking at the time of delivery is above regional and national averages. As my hon. Friend the Member for Sedgefield (Phil Wilson) made clear, breastfeeding rates are low, yet we know that it provides the best nutrition that babies and young children can get. Seven out of 10 adults in County Durham are overweight or obese, significantly more than the national average, and cardiovascular mortality rates are also higher than the national average.

I could go on with endless statistics, but we are making the point that County Durham is an area with high levels of disadvantage and poverty. It is below the national average on almost every public health indicator imaginable, yet what are the Government doing? They are not giving additional funds to address those problems and ensure that our services continue to improve; they are threatening to take money away.

The workforce would be significantly affected by this measure. There would be a significant reduction in the number of visits that health professionals could make and the universal work on emotional wellbeing would be removed. Instead, only higher level and more targeted work would take place, although we know that misses most of the families and individuals who would benefit from services. Other prevention priorities, including visits and programmes trying to address problems around smoking at the time of delivery, breastfeeding, unintentional injuries and obesity, would also be reduced. The service would have to focus on safeguarding, which would increase inequalities, and issues would be missed.

I could go on and on. We have already seen a massive reduction in services. For example, my constituency has no Sure Start centres operating, which means there is nothing in place to bring together services that could support very vulnerable families. Can the Minister look at that issue as well?

What do we want the Minister to do? The point was put forcefully by my right hon. Friend the Member for North Durham: we need a commitment from the Government to increasing public health funding in line with need; an extension to public health funding to be used in areas where the grant has been utilised effectively; and clarity on the timescale for decisions. We have already seen concern in County Durham about future funding, especially from the voluntary sector organisations that do much of the heavy lifting in terms of providing services to improve public health outcomes. The Government do not seem to be aware that funding for such organisations is often precarious and that they need some certainty from the Government to invest in staffing and services for the future.

The Government should certainly not be moving money from areas with the greatest health inequalities to those with the least health inequalities. They should be carrying out an impact assessment of any funding decision, so that we are really clear about what the impacts of that massive reduction of 38% in County Durham would lead to. As my right hon. and hon. Friends have said, this is an issue across north-east England. I look forward to hearing what the Minister will say to address this problem.

5.22 pm

Mrs Sharon Hodgson (Washington and Sunderland West) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship this afternoon, Mr Owen. I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for North Durham (Mr Jones) for securing this important debate and for his excellent speech. I also thank my hon. Friends the Members for Sedgefield (Phil Wilson) and for City of Durham (Dr Blackman-Woods) for their insightful and powerful contributions.

As I have said many times before, under the Tory-led coalition and the current Conservative Government, public health budgets have been cut by £700 million since 2013, with no financial settlement agreed so far post-2020. As we have heard, that means that vital public health services, such as those for smoking cessation, obesity, sexual health and many more, have been stripped back to the bare minimum. That has consequences: gonorrhoea is at its highest level in 40 years and syphilis at its highest level in 70 years; rates of smoking among pregnant women have risen for the first time on record; and Victorian diseases, such as scarlet fever, whooping cough, malnutrition and gout, have seen a 52% upturn since 2010, with an increase of over 3,000 hospital admissions per year.

Life expectancies are stalling and, in some places, declining, with the north-south divide as wide as ever in terms of health and productivity. For a number of us in this Chamber, it was the north-south divide that drove us into politics; to see it as wide as ever, and not closing, drives us to come to debates such as this one. This is a welcome opportunity to highlight and discuss public health in County Durham.

Overall, health and wellbeing have improved significantly in County Durham, but it still remains worse than the England average. Although it has improved in the north, the rest of the country has also improved, so the gap remains wide. In addition, large health inequalities still remain across County Durham, especially with regard to breastfeeding, babies born to mothers who smoke, childhood obesity and premature deaths. The impact becomes obvious when we look at life expectancy. As we have heard, a child born today in the most deprived areas of County Durham can expect to live between seven and eight years less than one born in the least deprived areas.

With that in mind, it is concerning and shocking that County Durham is the worst affected local authority in England when it comes to cuts to the public health grant. Current predictions suggest that Durham County Council will lose £18 million this year from its public health grants. To put that into perspective—I will repeat the figures we have already heard, because they are more shocking the more times you hear them—this means County Durham will be receiving an £18 million cut to public health budgets but Surrey County Council will receive £14.4 million extra and Hertfordshire County Council will receive a boost of £12.6 million.

What assessment has the Minister made of this funding disparity between councils in the north and south, and the impact that has on health outcomes? Does she agree with me that where there is need, funding should follow? How will the Minister support Durham County Council in delivering vital public health services to those who need them most?

The current grant for County Durham, with a population of 525,000, is £47.4 million, which equates to £90 per head. Does the Minister believe that this is a substantial amount of funding per person to tackle all the public
health issues, as well as look at prevention for smoking, alcohol and drug misuse, obesity and weight management? Does she believe that £90 per head is enough to also fund early years services, nutrition and physical activity programmes and support mental health and wellbeing services?

As has already been mentioned, there is a life expectancy gap between the north and south of England: it is clear that money follows higher life expectancies, rather than the other way around—or, indeed, deprivation—as it used to. In County Durham, women have a healthy life expectancy of 59. That is compared with Hertfordshire, where women have a healthy life expectancy of 66, and Surrey, where it is 68.

**Albert Owen (in the Chair):** To give time for the Minister, can the hon. Lady finish up, please?

**Mrs Hodgson:** Yes, I will. I ask the Minister: when will the Government agree a future funding settlement for public health? I am under the impression that this has been postponed now until after the leadership contest. Local authorities and public health services need to know where they stand. As my right hon. Friend the Member for North Durham said when he opened the debate, we cannot have County Durham or other local authorities being left behind any longer.

5.28 pm

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Seema Kennedy):** It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Owen. I thank the right hon. Member for North Durham (Mr Jones) for raising this important issue, and the hon. Members for Sedgefield (Phil Wilson) and for City of Durham (Dr Blackman-Woods) for their contributions.

The Government fully appreciate the importance of protecting and improving the health of the population. We share hon. Members’ commitment to prevention and public health, which this debate has highlighted. The costs, both to individual lives and to the NHS, are simply too great to ignore.

The population in England is growing, ageing and diversifying rapidly. Some 40% of morbidity is preventable, and 60% of 60-year-olds have at least one long-term condition. Helping people to stay well, in work and in their own homes for longer is vital. As hon. Members have highlighted, the gap in healthy life expectancy between the most and least deprived areas of England is approximately 19 years for both sexes. As somebody who was born in Lancashire and represents a Lancashire seat, I see that disparity in my constituency. It is a great motivating factor for me in my role, as it was for my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister when she set her grand challenge of extending a person’s period of healthy, independent and active life by five years by 2035.

However, we will not achieve that by simply adding five extra years at the end of life; as with many things, the earlier we start, the more we stand to gain. Investment in early years and onwards is essential if we want positively to influence future lifestyle choices, prevent disabling conditions and enable people to contribute fully to society. We must continue to focus our efforts on areas such as digital technology and behavioural science so that we can show the public that the healthy choice is the easy choice.

We are doing work—on childhood obesity, smoking, air quality and more—that has the potential to make a real difference to people’s health and wellbeing. The amount of sugar in drinks has been reduced by 11% and average calories per portion have been cut by 6% in response to our soft drinks industry levy. By 2020, the NHS diabetes prevention programme will support 100,000 people at risk of diabetes each year across England. Last year’s ambitious prevention vision statement and the forthcoming prevention Green Paper will enable us to meet the ageing grand challenge and address health inequalities, supporting people to live longer, healthier lives.

We recognise that the funding position for local authorities is extremely challenging and understand the huge efforts that local government has made to focus on securing best value for every pound it spends. The 2015 spending review made available £16 billion of funding for local authorities in England over the five-year period. I remind the House that that is in addition to the money the NHS spends, which is part of the public health offer on prevention and includes our world-leading screening and immunisation programme and the world’s first national diabetes prevention programme.

Today’s debate has highlighted an important issue about the distribution of funding for local authority public health functions. Historically, funding for public health services in the NHS was left to local decision and was not necessarily based on need, which led to wide disparities in the amount of funding dedicated locally to public health services. Before these functions were transferred to local government, we asked the independent Advisory Committee on Resource Allocation to develop a needs-based formula for the distribution of the public health grant. The introduction of that formula meant that some local authorities received more than their target allocation under the ACRA formula and others received funding under target. In 2013-14 and 2014-15, when the overall grant was subject to growth, local authorities’ funding was iterated closer to their target through a mechanism called “pace of change”.

In 2015, ACRA was asked to update the formula to take account of the transfer of responsibility for commissioning health visiting services from NHS England to local authorities. We consulted on this formula and ACRA made recommendations to Government in 2016. I understand that the public health formula is more heavily weighted towards deprivation than either the adult social care formula or the clinical commissioning group formulation.

**Mrs Hodgson:** It is not working.

**Seema Kennedy:** Of course we want evidence. The shadow Minister says from a sedentary position that it is not working. We did an impact assessment in 2015-16 and we are reviewing all the evidence in preparation for the next spending review.

**Phil Wilson:** Just for clarification, did the Minister actually say that the formula is not working?

**Mrs Hodgson:** No; I said that.
Seema Kennedy: No, I was repeating what the shadow Minister had said.

The recommended formula, which would create winners and losers in terms of overall levels of funding because of the disparity in historical spend compared with current need, has not been implemented because of the Government’s intention to extend the system of retained business rates. We continue to review the position, and future spending levels will be decided as part of the spending review, where we will review all available evidence.

I commend all local authorities on the efforts they are making to improve population health, as well as third-sector groups such as the children in Cleves Cross with their edible walkways. We continue to believe that local authorities best meet the needs of their populations.

Dr Blackman-Woods: I am sure the Minister would accept that any formula that moves services from areas of relatively high need to areas of low need cannot be working properly. Does she also accept that it is simply not fair to push the onus to provide more services on to local authorities? As my right hon. Friend the Member for North Durham (Mr Jones) made clear, Durham County Council’s budget has been cut by 60% since 2010.

Seema Kennedy: I believe that local authorities and local communities are the right place for public health to be situated, because they best understand the needs of their communities.

Mr Kevan Jones: Will the Minister give way?

Seema Kennedy: May I just finish addressing the point made by the hon. Member for City of Durham? I also want to ensure I give the right hon. Gentleman, who moved the motion, time to wind up the debate. We recognise that there has been pressure on local authorities and we commend them for the work they have done. As I have said, we continue to review the position, and future spending levels will be decided as part of the spending review.

Mr Jones: I agree with the Minister that local communities are best placed to decide these things, but is she happy with the fact that under the new funding formula, there is no onus on local government at all to use money for public health?

Seema Kennedy: I think public health is ring-fenced, and local government does have to use the funding for that. We are reviewing the position, and we will look at all the evidence carefully in the upcoming spending review.

Across England, we are seeing examples of councils adopting new service models and commissioning more effectively and innovatively. Stakeholders often tell us, most recently through the review of commissioning sexual health and health visiting services, that councils are achieving better value for money while maintaining or improving outcomes in challenging financial circumstances.

However, we need to acknowledge that improving public health is about far more than the grant, and we know that spending more money does not necessarily improve outcomes. What we spend it on matters a lot. That covers all local government activity, including transport, planning, housing and the economy, all of which contribute to population health and wellbeing. The work that local government does on the ground through place-based approaches makes joining up those different factors easier, and the NHS long-term plan has a significant focus on prevention and reducing health inequalities.

We do not know what the outcome of the spending review will be, but I am committed to working closely with local government and other partners to build on the achievements of the past six years. We need to take action on a local, national and global level to meet the public health needs of the present and rise to the public health challenges of the future.

5.37 pm

Mr Kevan Jones: I thank the Minister for that. She is a new Minister, so I will give her a word of advice: do not come to a debate and just read out a civil servant’s speech, as she did today. It is all right her saying that she recognises the importance of public health, but in her position she needs to be a champion for public health. If that means giving the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government a kicking, she needs to do it. Without that, demand will increase on her Department of Health and Social Care and its budget.

I am sorry, but I just do not accept what the Minister says about efficiencies. No organisation can have 38% taken out of its budget through efficiencies while delivering the same thing. Morally, this policy, which is like Robin Hood in reverse—taking from the poor and giving to the rich—is just not acceptable. I expect her to be a champion for public health, because all the evidence from this country and internationally—not from politicians for party political points—is that early and proper direction of public health funding not only reduces demand on the health service but improves people’s lives.

It cannot be right that one of the most deprived parts of the UK—the north-east of England, and County Durham in particular—has its budgets and its council’s ability to provide public health services to its population reduced because of a funding formula put in place by this Government. Other areas, which I and my hon. Friends the Members for Sedgefield (Phil Wilson), for City of Durham (Dr Blackman-Woods) and for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson) highlighted, have far fewer health needs.

We cannot take need out of the funding formula and hide behind the NHS long-term plan. The plan has all good intentions in trying to address health inequalities, but that will not be done without proper investment. Since 2013, Durham County Council has proven—in very straitened circumstances, and not just in this area but in how it has administered its budgets—that it has been able to get efficiencies. However, there is a limit to that, and taking 38% out will not work. This is simply not fair, Minister. As someone who represents a northern constituency, she should recognise that.

On whether we will see any change from the new leadership of the Tory party, if the front-runner gets it I very much doubt that. My hon. Friend the Member for Sedgefield is correct: directing money to tax cuts for the wealthy will not mean a growth in public services.
Public health is not a luxury; it is a vital part of a strategy not only to tackle inequality, but to tackle unfairness and to make people’s lives better.

I went into politics to make people’s lives better, as I am sure the Minister did. Her Government—I accept that it is not her Department, but the local government Department—are making people’s life chances worse. That cannot be right.
We concluded that local councils have a really important role to play in developing that approach. They need to work with their communities and businesses, and try to create a sense of place for the area, which might be very different from the place next door. On one of our visits, we went to Stockton, which had been badly hit by the loss of retailers. It was putting on bike rides, fun runs, marathons, outdoor theatre and other activities to try to encourage people, particularly in the summer months, to come into Stockton centre and use the retail facilities. We heard about Malton, which is successfully branding itself as a place to go for food. Centres can identify themselves in different ways to show that they are an attractive place for people to come to.

Business improvement districts, where local businesses come in, can play an important part. We were pleased that the Government accepted our recommendation that community representatives should be encouraged to sit on BIDs. BIDs should be about not just business, but community. That is in keeping with our general recommendation to change the whole approach of high streets from simply retail and business to wider community uses.

A key issue from a council perspective was local plans, which should be living mechanisms that are kept up to date. We urged all local authorities to adopt “living documents, regularly updated to capture and reflect changing trends,” which “must be forward looking, anticipating what will happen in five years’ time.”

Local authorities should have dynamic strategies for the high street of the sort we have just talked about. We were pleased that the Government basically accepted that all local plans should be reviewed every five years, and that town and city centre strategies should be looking at least 10 years ahead. They were on the same wavelength.

All I would say to the Government is, go look at the cuts of about 50% that councils have made to their planning budgets. When planning departments prioritise planning applications, they often lack staff with the capacity and capability to think ahead and do the necessary local plan work. There is a concern that councils often have not caught up with the rapid change in online shopping, and therefore their local plans are out of date and do not reflect that change. They are not looking at the changes that they need to make to the land use in their town and city centres.

When we went to Darlington, it was readily accepted that a whole retail area might simply have to be closed down, and that a completely different use might have to be found for that part of the town. It is very simple maths: if 20% of the shopping that was done on the high street 30 years ago is now done online, we need 20% fewer shops. We do not want that to happen in a pepper-potted way, which would simply mean a bit of decay everywhere; we need to concentrate it and change how that land is used in the future.

We recognise that, as part of this process, the Government’s £675 million future high streets fund was helpful. It was there for councils and businesses to tap into and use for this change process. Of course, we do not think it is enough, although the Government do: that is one point of disagreement. We also made the
point that the taskforce that the Government set up—Sir John Timpson came along and talked about it—is a really helpful way forward, but we said that it cannot be a talking shop. It must be a place where councils and others can go and get real, hard advice, and where we can collect examples of good practice. Very often, what is done in one area can be learned from and implemented in another. That is something that we can greatly benefit from.

We identified two additional areas of interest where local government is trying to work with business to change, and where change is needed from central Government. The first is compulsory purchase orders. We learned that where councils try to change land use in an area, they often have to compulsorily purchase some properties. Again, we are pleased with the Government’s response. They accepted that and said that they will review the whole process, which is cumbersome, long-winded, time-consuming and costly.

A slightly more difficult area was permitted development rights, for which the Government consulted about extensions at the same time. We said that before the Government extended further permitted development rights, it would be helpful if they carried out an assessment of the impact on the high street of their previous extensions to those rights. The Government did not agree to that, which is disappointing. It is always good to have an impact assessment on what has already happened before doing something else, but we disagreed on that.

We were clear that permitted development rights should not be allowed to get in the way of a local plan that tries to change the fundamental land use of part of a centre. If a local authority is trying to change buildings from retail into housing, leisure or a park, for example, it is not helpful if someone converts the odd shop into a house a few months before that local plan comes into effect. The local authority would then have to say, “Actually, you did that under permitted development rights, but now we have a local plan, which means we need to compulsorily purchase those properties and fundamentally change the land use.”

There ought to be a proviso that if a local plan is going to re-designate an area and affect particular properties, it is not helpful to have permitted development rights for the same properties at the same time. The Government need to think carefully about that. At the end of the day, it is not helpful to the individuals to be given that freedom, which is not really a freedom.

The biggest issue on which we disagree with the Government is that of business rates. Every bit of evidence we received showed that there is a problem. I am serving as a guest on the Treasury Committee, which is conducting an inquiry into business rates, and the same sort of evidence is coming forward. Not everyone has the same solution; some want wholesale reform of business rates, while others simply want some change. The biggest issue is that of business rates, which is not really a freedom.

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That simply is not fair—this is about the element of fairness. People on the high street are trying to trade at a significant cost disadvantage. Only the Government can alter that. Simply altering business rates will not change the high street back to how it was 20 years ago, but there needs to be a recognition that shopping habits are changing and that taxation policy ought to change in line with that.

We recommended that the Government look at a number of options: an online sales tax, an extension to VAT, a green tax on deliveries, or anything to reflect changing shopping habits. That money could be used to reduce the general business rates paid on the high street, to give a holiday when a business carries out improvements to stop an immediate rise in its business rates, or to add to the Government’s fund to help high streets. The Government had all those options—we were not totally prescriptive—but they came back and said no; they did not want to do anything at all.

The Government said that they were bringing in lots of reforms, which they are, but a point that has been made to us quite strongly is that although the sticking plaster of reliefs is a welcome and useful mechanism, lots of those sticking plasters on top of one another becomes an unsightly and terribly confusing mess. Lots of people said that the system was now really confusing, with a number of reliefs in place. The evidence that I heard at the Treasury Committee evidence session the other day clearly suggested that the need for so many reliefs so frequently indicates that the basic system is flawed and in need of more substantive review.

Interestingly, Sir Amyas Morse, in his retirement swansong before the Committee at our evidence session on local authority finance—he is normally forthright in his views—said:

“I am concerned as to how realistic basing everything on business rates really is...it is concerning as to whether something that is based on a square footage formula in the modern day is going to be terribly relevant to measuring business activity... Even though it may be convenient to go forward with it now, I cannot believe it will endure forever, because it is just such an odd way of trying to measure business activity.”

He is right. Business rates are easy, and we are probably not going to tear them up, forget about them and change them tomorrow, because they are relatively easy to collect—that is a great benefit of them—but thinking that all business taxation at local level should rely on square footage is something that goes back historically, because it was an easy thing to do when everybody shopped in a shop. Ministers have to think a bit about the longer term.

Sir Amyas said that the situation will not endure forever. Well, Ministers do not tend to endure forever. Perhaps this Minister has other aspirations but, realistically, at some point a Minister will have to grasp the nettle and consider, if not completely scrapping business rates, then at least recognising that reform has to happen in the light of changing shopping habits. That is the biggest issue on which we really want to push Ministers, because at some point this is going to change, and we cannot carry on disadvantaging our high street retailers in the meantime.

As I explained, local government has a role here in developing strategies and local plans; central Government have a role in looking at changes to business rates, compulsory purchase powers and other things; and
retailers also have a responsibility. I mentioned that Stockton is doing interesting things, and I asked, “Is bringing all these ventures into Stockton centre really helping?” They said, “Yes, sort of, but when we asked some of our retailers how many more people they got through their shops, they said, ‘Not that many, because we close at 5.30.’” Retailers have to understand that they have to change their approach to suit the customer—that is really important. We heard other examples of retailers, even small ones, using social media to advise their regular customers of changes to products in their store.

Landlords also have to get real. There are still landlords with completely unrealistic retail unit asset values on their books, based on rental values as they were 10 or 15 years ago. Some big retailers are proactive and engaged. They engage in BIDs and look at how they can improve their shopping facilities, while others just see them as a money-making venture. We saw examples of shops lying empty, but there was a long lease, so the landlord was just sitting there and getting the money in, and had no real incentive to go and find another tenant. There have to be changes in that respect.

We asked the Government to review the Landlord and Tenant Act 1954, and they say that they will look at whether that should be reviewed. That was a helpful response. However, we also asked the Government at least to consider how they might look again at upward-only rent reviews, and they said, “No, we’re not going to interfere in contracts between landlord and tenant.” We only asked them to look at that. I hope that they might have another think about looking at it, because it was raised with us on a number of occasions.

There are challenges not merely for local government, but for central Government, retailers and landlords. We have said that there are real challenges. We can all see the challenges and problems on our high streets. We were worried and we said in our concluding remarks:

“Unless... urgent action is taken, we fear that further deterioration, loss of visitors and dereliction may lead to some high streets and town centres disappearing altogether.”

Given what has happened over the past 10 or 15 years, and if another 10 or 15 years are spent going in the same direction, we can see that happening.

We cannot predict what lies ahead, but online sales have doubled in the past five years, so it is almost certain that they will grow. The situation will not stand still. People will not reverse their shopping habits but carry on in very much the same direction, which will further undermine retail sales on the high street—it is bound to.

In our report, however, we said that provided that everyone, including the Minister—who is present, while others are not, so we will direct this to her—considers and puts into place our recommendations, high streets and town centres can have a better future. That will require a shift from retail-focused activities to new purposes and uses that foster greater social interaction, community spirit and local identity.

I am pleased to recommend the report. I hope that we can all work together to have it implemented. Many of our recommendations have been accepted by the Minister, but I have pointed out some that have not; I hope she will give us an even more helpful response about those today.

Several hon. Members rose—

Graham Stringer (in the Chair): Order. I intend to call the SNP spokesperson at 2.30 pm. Five Back Benchers are indicating that they wish to speak, so the arithmetic is straightforward: there is no need for a time limit.

1.51 pm

Mr Mark Prisk (Hertford and Stortford) (Con): I draw the House’s attention to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests—namely, that I am a director of Stanfords, a travel and cartography business, and, with my sister, a joint owner of a small commercial high street property.

It is a pleasure to follow the Chair of our Select Committee, the hon. Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts), who gave a good synopsis of the inquiry and of the report. I will share a number of the points that he made, but I will try not to duplicate.

This issue affects not just every high street but, by that very fact, every community. Every constituency has areas we can think of that are seriously struggling to cope. High streets face difficulties due to a long-term shift in the way people shop, rising costs and the fact that consumer demand is struggling and changing. That perfect storm of rising costs and weaker demand means that we need to rethink the role and character of our town centres or high streets.

I will focus on three areas. First, town centres are not dead—that is certainly the view of the Government and of our Committee—but an awful lot of them are in intensive care, and some may not make it. We need to free our high streets. Look at the different reasons cited for the problems: restrictive planning arrangements, a heavy burden of taxes and charges, and an unwillingness of some retailers to rethink their business model—as we have heard—and of building owners to reconsider how they collaborate with their near neighbours. Town centres therefore need to change. The requirement, as the report rightly says, is to move towards a broad range of communal activities. Fundamentally, for a town centre to succeed in the future, it must be a place where people want to meet, to shop, sure, and to socialise, to go to a movie, to keep fit, to meet friends or to eat and drink—all those different activities. In different locations, however, the exact priorities will be different depending on local demand.

The concept of a place where people want to meet means that a successful town centre not only has to be able to adapt from where it is now but has to be free in the future to adapt as consumer demand continues to change. It needs to have a public realm that is attractive, welcoming and safe. That is about functional and aesthetic design and about engagement with the community. I totally endorse the point about adapting BIDs, including having community representatives. The other element of the notion of a place where people meet is that access has to be convenient. As Members present understand, beneath that is a whole raft of issues including the location and pricing of parking, alternative means of transport to the town centre, walkability and the interactions of pedestrians, cyclists and so on.

Secondly, on flexibility, the Chair of the Committee rightly pointed out other planning issues, but one of the critical ones is use classes. I understand why in the past...
they were established but, frankly—I say this as a surveyor—they have become too complex and counterproductive. Some argue, “We just need to tinker a little with the use classes, remove some of the sub-categories and everything will be fine.” I strongly disagree. We need to establish a single town centre use, which is consumer-facing and embraces a wide range of activities. I recognise that there might be an argument for food preparation to be a subset, on the grounds of public health, but to my mind, the notion of that town centre use class, which would allow movement of activities, is crucial for town centres to have flexibility.

Alongside that, ensuring that building owners, businesses and local authorities change their mindsets is important to flexibility. That is about the quality of local leadership, which was clear from the evidence to the Committee. Often the distinction between neighbouring towns is the calibre of local leadership. Mark Williams, director of the Hark Group, said:

“Leadership must come from the local authority, for the reasons I have said: it is their town and it should give very clear direction as to what it wants.”

That is true, but with one caveat: the local authority cannot do that on its own; it has to work in partnership. Property owners and other stakeholders need to collaborate. The collaborative nature of forums such as BIDs where everyone involved works together is important. I would like to see BIDs strengthened with new powers, capabilities and membership.

Finally, on digital taxes and online competition, I am disappointed by the Government’s response to the report—although I recognise the hand of the Treasury, probably, rather than of the Ministry. I take the view that we must ensure that all retailers pay comparable tax rates, unlike now. Online retailers have an inherent competitive advantage, as the Chair of the Committee rightly pointed out. Within retailing, we need to shift to a much stronger emphasis on turnover, rather than on fixed property costs.

I have seen several good propositions, such as a simple consolidated tax for smaller businesses or—from Tesco—an online sales levy. A reduction in the business rate would allow such an online sales levy; to ensure that, from the Treasury’s point of view, the revenue is balanced and, from the competition point of view, the online retailer and the bricks-and-mortar retailer are able to compete fairly. There is a good opportunity there. I simply say to the Minister, I hope that we will see more lateral thinking on that.

Finally, in my book, this issue affects every single community. We need to see action, in particular if we are not to see the very heart of many of our communities disappear altogether.

1.58 pm

Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): I welcome this report, and add my thanks to the Chair of the Committee, the hon. Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts), and everyone who contributed to it.

Town centres and high streets matter because they are the hearts of our communities. They are the places where people come together to access goods and services, to meet each other and to enjoy leisure time. People often feel a strong sense of connection to their place and they enjoy local distinctiveness as part of their identity. People enjoy the relationships they have in their local town centres, with the shopkeepers and café owners who serve them, with the voluntary sector organisations they encounter, and with the public services that they can access in such locations.

Our report found that unlike in the 1990s, when high street decline was linked to the wider economic recession, and the threat of the internet was only beginning to loom on the horizon, the issues facing town centres now are much more fundamental and structural. I will highlight a number of issues covered by the report that are affecting the town centres and high streets in my constituency.

Whether in West Norwood, East Dulwich, Brixton West Dulwich, Dulwich Village, Herne Hill or Crystal Palace, I am proud of the distinctiveness of the town centres and high streets in my constituency, the independent businesses, which serve their communities, and the sense of place and community, which they help to foster. Businesses in my constituency are really suffering. Rents in London are going up, and rents feed into the calculation of business rates. One owner of a hugely popular, much-loved local shop contacted me to say that following the recent revaluation, his rateable value had increased by 110%, and his bill by 34% once transitional relief had been applied. Added to that, he told me that he is being squeezed by increases in employers’ national insurance contributions and his rent. His turnover is substantially down as a direct result of online competition.

In West Norwood next week we will see the closure of the last bank in the town centre, when Barclays shuts its doors for the last time. That is a particular blow in an area with a high number of elderly and disabled residents, and one that will further increase financial exclusion in that part of my constituency and harm the wider town centre. Trade will be driven away as people go to other places for their essential banking transactions and choose to spend their money elsewhere.

The relaxation of permitted development rights is already a disaster, resulting in poor-quality homes in the wrong locations, and no affordable housing or contribution to services and facilities. The good examples of office-to-residential conversion generally would have achieved planning consent in any event, so PDR has simply facilitated the delivery of poor-quality homes. For town centres, the Government have proposed further expansion of permitted development rights to enable shops to be converted to residential. That would be an unmitigated disaster for town centres. It is true that in many town centres there is too much retail space, but how and where to reduce that and introduce other uses is a strategic decision that should be taken by the local authority, in consultation with the community. Allowing landlords that freedom runs the risk of gap-toothed high streets up and down the country, rather than the sensible consolidation of a retail heart where it is needed.

Our report is right to identify the critical nature of strong local authority leadership in supporting healthy town centres, but planning departments have been cut to the bone under nine years of austerity. Thriving town centres need a strong vision, effective partnerships between councils, businesses and the community and investment in the public realm, increasingly with a focus on sustainability and climate change at their heart. We need to clean up the air in town centres, deliver safe routes for walking and cycling and create pleasant open spaces resilient to hotter summers and wetter weather.
That simply cannot be done with current resources. Government must invest in and empower local authorities to play the leadership role on behalf of our towns centres that we know can be so effective.

I want to return to the issue of business rates. A fundamental problem for our town centres is that business rates do not reflect the value that people place on their local high street. They penalise town centre retailers in more expensive property, to the benefit of internet-based businesses operating out of low-value warehouses. It is the job of the taxation system to redistribute resources according to the public goods that communities value. Town centres are one such public good. The value of the relationship that an isolated elderly person has with their local shopkeeper does not appear on any balance sheet. Our taxation system must take account of that value and redistribute resources to serve our town centres.

It is for the Government to provide the policy and taxation regime that can support our town centres, whether by creating an obligation for banks to provide branch-based services in every community in the country, redistributing businesses rates to support our town centres or investing in our local authorities to equip and enable them to play a leadership role. The Government are not doing enough; they must show more leadership.

2.4 pm

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Stringer, I believe for the first time. As a distinguished former leader of a city council, you will understand the importance of the high street not only to our towns and cities but to people across the country. I apologise to the hon. Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts), the Chair of the Select Committee, for being slightly late for the debate; I was engaged as the secretary of the 1922 committee, administering the ballot for the leadership of the Conservative and Unionist party.

I have a long memory of the high street; when I was a young lad, the shops were open probably five days a week: on Saturday all day, closed on Wednesday lunchtime and often closed on Monday, too. It was the advent of another subject dear to my heart—large-scale immigration to this country—that enabled the Gujarati community and others to come here and see the benefit of cornering the market and opening for longer. That shows how retail outlets have to change with the times. It is no longer good enough to be open from 9 to 5.30 or 6; shops have to be open seven days a week to make money.

I think it is fair to remind the Minister that this report is cross-party and its recommendations are agreed and strongly endorsed by all members of the Select Committee, so they have a lot of strength behind them. I want to touch on one or two things that are appropriate on this issue. First, to rejuvenate our high streets, I agree with the hon. Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes) about allowing retail properties to be converted to rather unsuitable homes for people. They were originally intended to be retail units and were not fit for purpose, which is why we need fundamental reform.

However, there are large numbers of flats above high-street shops that were originally made as homes. A lot of those have been converted to become storage units, office space or for other purposes. To rejuvenate our high streets, we need to get people back to living in those properties. In times gone by, the shop owners would live above the premises and have a very short commute to work. These days, that is not the case. We need, and should encourage, a rejuvenation project to encourage those properties to be brought back into use for living accommodation.

The Chair of the Select Committee mentioned our visit to Darlington and Stockton. It was shock to us that Marks & Spencer—a key store in the middle of the high street—had closed down. We asked why, and were told that it could not make money. It had a 250-year lease on the property, and the property owner quite reasonably said, “Fine. You just keep paying us for 250 years.” No one would take on the lease because it was too expensive, so it blighted the whole high street.

The Government need to look at ownership of properties, because without understanding who owns properties and what pressure can be brought on them to change the basis of rent or encourage them to let the properties at a reasonable rate, our high streets will be blighted for evermore.

I was also struck when I had a briefing from Tesco about business rates and their impact on its stores. Tesco, a very successful company across the UK, has concentrated not on the big retail stores but the smaller, Metro-type operations on our high streets. That is welcome because it brings retail back to people at a reasonable price, drives footfall and encourages the development of other comparable retail units on the high street. The slight problem is that its finances on turnover and business rates are remarkably tight. It makes only something like a 4% margin, so if retail sales fall, those stores will be in potential crisis. If they close, many other stores along that high street will close with them, because people will not go to them. There is a fact of life that we must look at: frankly, business rates for retail units are not fit for purpose and need fundamental reform.

The arguments about an online sales tax are reasonable, and I think there are concerns. The first question is whether we can collect the money. Business rates associated with a property are relatively easy to collect. However, an online sales tax should also be reasonably easy to collect. The next question is where that money goes. If an online sales tax is introduced on warehousing or companies such as Amazon, will it be collected from a central point and then distributed? How will it be provided to local authorities, which will depend on business rates, or some form of business taxation, for their funding?

My answer is that we need an online sales tax, but it needs to be set at a reasonable rate—1%, 2% or whatever—and then distributed on the basis of the business rates income that otherwise would have accrued to a local authority. That is one way we could make this happen. Not reforming business rates is completely unacceptable, because the burden will become greater and greater. The other issue that affects retail units is that, as the Government response to our report shows, the Government have done a whole series of complicated things that, frankly, have distorted the market completely. They have distorted business rates and made them even less fit for purpose, which is why we need fundamental reform and review.

High streets up and down our country have gone through various problems, and many of them are looking a bit tired. They need to be revitalised and rethought. We need new ideas, new shops, new facilities and encouragement from local authorities to increase footfall to those premises. We must build up the partnership
between local authorities and retailers. It is a symbiotic relationship: the reality is that if local authorities do not co-operate with retailers, they will lose business rates income, which will be even more important to them in the future. We look to my hon. Friend the Minister to come up with some wise words and stronger action—particularly on business rates, on which the Government’s response was rather disappointing. I hope we see further action from the Government in that area.

2.12 pm

**Rachael Maskell** (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Stringer. I, too, welcome the Select Committee’s report. I thought it was outstanding, particularly in the light of the challenges that my city experiences on a day-to-day basis, on which I have advocated action in this place. Those who are familiar with our debates on these issues will know that I have made many contributions, particularly about business rates—an issue that the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) articulated so well and that I will return to shortly.

York provides an incredible high street experience for people visiting our city, but we also need to make the city work for local residents, who increasingly do not visit the city centre. We should reflect more on the experience of residents and on how communities engage with these issues, because communities can really make a high street. Although our city has 7 million visitors a year, we must give the residents—those who are there day in, day out—the opportunity to have both a real shopping experience and a wider experience. That is why I welcome the report’s suggestion that we should look at not just a retail opportunity but a whole community opportunity.

Bishy Road in York was, frankly, a dying high street. The post office had moved out and the street was struggling. However, it has been rejuvenated, to the point of winning a Great British High Street award, because it built its whole centre on the wider community. Traders’ engagement with the community means that it is now the go-to place in our city for a retail experience; there are lots of different types of outlets on the street.

However, the picture across the city is not universal. York has many exciting places for people to engage in, which very much attract the external community—I am thinking of Jorvik and the museums in our city centre—but local residents really struggle to be able to afford to benefit from them. Like so many places, York has seen a real hollowing-out of shopping centres, particularly on Coney Street, where shops are struggling, not least because of the huge pressure on business rates.

Before I move on to business rates, let me mention the great opportunities for innovation across our city. The report did not particularly reflect on markets, but they are a great place for businesses to develop and grow. We should look at the role of markets on our high streets, and at how they interact with the wider retail experience. Spark York, a new development built in shipping containers, has enabled many businesses to start up. It has a real vibe about it and it provides great opportunities. Those kinds of initiatives will help to bring some regeneration. For example, Spark gives good, ethical businesses the opportunity to start up and then move out to benefit from opportunities on the wider high street.

I take slight issue with what the report says about transportation into urban centres. It focuses on car parking. In an age when many of our urban centres are so polluted and congested, we need to ensure that there is really good public transport infrastructure to bring people in. York has one of the best park and ride facilities in the country. Opening up opportunities for living streets, for active travel and for park and ride on public transport is a way of regenerating our urban centres. Of course, if people walk and cycle rather than just going to their cars, there is more engagement; it has been shown that businesses benefit more if people use public transport and active travel. I hope that the Minister will take that on board.

We also need to ensure that there are real community spaces in the heart of our cities. I am thinking about libraries—people used to go to city centres to visit libraries, but they have disappeared—swimming pools and green spaces. We must ensure that people can access community hubs. Because of the lack of facilities and space, and the cost, community hubs are often pushed out to the periphery of the city. If there were go-to places at the heart of the city for residents to congregate and attend events, residents would be drawn into the city again. We need to square that circle to ensure that we have good community spaces in the heart of our city centres.

Business rates have been a particular problem in York. The analysis of what has happened was worked through with Make It York and the York Retail Forum. Across the country, 29% of the high street is owned by international businesses. We might, at one level, argue that that is inward investment, but at the same time it leads to a detached relationship between landlords and local centres. Investors who own property in the city centre often have wider interests, including maintaining their share price and increasing the value of their assets. When an investor charges high rent on a property, that hurts the shop owner, but there is a wider, more important benefit to the investor. Higher rent increases the property’s valuation, which pushes up business rates, so people are hit by higher rents and higher business rates.

The false economy, or bubble, that that creates is forcing many of the independents in York, and many other shops, off the high street. We have to address the relationship between property owners and the city or town centre. Social clauses should be built into contracts to force that relationship back to a sensible place. If a property owner does not make the right decisions for the wider area then, frankly, they should not own space on the high street.

We must also look at new developments. In York, we are on the cusp of the exciting York Central development, which has been through many iterations in planning. It was going to be a full retail piece built into the city centre. That is no longer the case, but the plan is still to have retail outlets as part of the 400,000 square metres site. However, if the planning goes ahead, which sees the development in isolation from the rest of the city, there could be a serious detrimental impact on the city itself.

When we look at developing new sites, we need to take into account the broader impact. Sadly, that is not the case for the York Central development, where no appraisal was undertaken to see what its impact could be on the wider city. The plan is on the Secretary of
State’s desk. There has been a request for a call-in, which we hope will be honoured to allow the plans to be revisited, not least because of the plan’s housing and limited wider economic opportunities.

I welcome the Government’s future high streets fund, which is a good start. Like many, I believe that it needs to grow and be dedicated to sharing good practice. York has an interest in benefiting from the fund to ensure that our city works for residents as well as visitors in future. It is also important for those people up and down our country who are working hard to try to make their high street businesses work for everyone’s benefit.

2.21 pm

Mohammad Yasin (Bedford) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Stringer, and to be here as the newest member of the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts) on the excellent report, which was published before I joined the Committee.

The plight of our high streets is an issue for every MP in the country. Only a few high streets have escaped the pressures on the retail industry that have affected our towns and cities in recent years. Only yesterday came the announcement that Bedford will lose its Topshop and Topman store. We have already lost our Marks & Spencer store, which was in Bedford for more than 100 years. The loss of such stores is a big blow to our town, but the fact is that more of us are shopping online and prefer the convenience of free parking and more choice offered outside the town centre.

I agree with the report’s overall realism and its recognition that we will have to be creative and think of ways to transform our high streets, making them attractive as community hubs. I am encouraged to see such an initiative already taking place and blossoming in Bedford. From next week, in collaboration with WH Smith, a Marks & Spencer food offering will be available from the Harpur shopping centre in the town centre. Last weekend 74 independent traders in Bedford joined forces to promote “fiver fest,” with offers in each store for £5. Our local business improvement district is investing in promotional activities throughout the year, and the shopping centre, which has had an impressive facelift, now offers a soft play area. Local businesses are fighting back, and it is initiatives like those that give me great hope that our towns will survive.

However, it will be an uphill struggle as long as the Government’s austerity agenda continues. Over recent years they have actively created a hostile environment for retail, and I am concerned that several prominent Tory leadership candidates seem determined to disregard all the evidence about the catastrophic impact of a no-deal Brexit on businesses, many of which have no plan for an economic shock.

I share the report’s vision for activity-based community gathering places where retail is a smaller part of a wider offering and where green space, leisure, arts and culture, and health and social care services combine with housing to create a space based on social and community interactions. It is important that we remember, however, that not everyone can adapt. Recent changes present a big loss to those who are less mobile. Older customers who do not shop online or have access to out-of-town outlets have suffered. Vulnerable people must not be forgotten in regeneration plans. We must focus on better, affordable, greener, wheelchair and family-friendly public transport and spaces.

I have pledged my support for the council’s bid to the future high street fund, but in reality the fund is insufficient to cover the urgent investment needed for long-term sustainable urban regeneration. I hope that the next Prime Minister understands that investing in our high streets and creating a level playing field for online and urban retail will pay dividends for businesses and communities.

2.25 pm

Douglas Chapman (Dunfermline and West Fife) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Stringer. I thank the hon. Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts) for bringing forward the report and for the positive and meaningful contribution that the Committee has made to the overall debate. As several hon. Members have said, this issue affects every constituency, irrespective of where it is. I support many of the report’s recommendations and know that if more SNP colleagues were in their places, they would support them, too.

The Government have not accepted all the recommendations in full. I hope the Committee will keep pushing and encouraging them to deliver more, fund more and provide more, especially in leadership, which is critical to future success. The hon. Member for Hertford and Stortford (Mr Prisk) said that some of our town centres are not dead but may be in intensive care, and they really need that support and leadership if we are to make them viable, vibrant places for the future.

The hon. Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes) homed in on business rates, which could be a big driver in how town centres are allowed to develop, as well as how we might start to deal with the closure of banks and post offices, which affect the general feel of our high streets. The Committee’s report talked about the impact of business rates on town centre businesses and looked at methods to reduce the burden.

I have a few examples from Scotland—as the Minister will appreciate, I usually do—where for the past 10 years we have run a highly successful business bonus scheme: a package of rates relief now worth £750 million to small businesses. Under the current scheme, small businesses can claim rate relief to the combined rateable value of their business premises up to £35,000, or the rateable value for individual premises if under £18,000. Therefore, many businesses do not pay rates at all, and even those with rates that sit between £15,000 and £18,000 can still qualify for a 25% rate relief. Such support saves businesses up to £7,350 each financial year. As margins in the retail sector are becoming so narrow and squeezed, that is sometimes the difference between shops staying in business and pulling down the shutters.

Under the Scottish Government, 90% of businesses will pay a lower poundage than they would anywhere else in the UK. That all equates to a more generous package of non-domestic business rates relief in the UK. Just as the Committee has suggested, small steps can make a huge difference to the vibrancy of our town centres.

In Scotland, we have also launched a £50 million town centre fund in partnership with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities, to boost high streets and
town centres. I note that the Committee recommendations on the UK Government’s future high streets fund underline the importance of strong local leadership. There is no better business intelligence available than that obtained from people working on the ground among businesspeople and retailers and the communities in which they operate. It is vital to tap into that knowledge to identify where best to allocate resources that will drive forward growth and help our town centres adapt to modern-day markets. That important point was raised by the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman), who talked about the need for local town centres to adapt and change. He came here hotfoot from the 1922 committee; maybe that should now be called the 2022 committee, if he wants to adapt and change in the future.

Another area that has been important for Scotland has been the growth in regional economies. We have invested heavily in the city growth deals. As I am sure the Minister will recognise, we have not, disappointingly, seen those deals matched by UK Government Departments. The Scottish Government have already committed £388 million more to the growth deals than the UK Government. Although it may not be relevant to this particular report, I say to the Minister that we would like to take these opportunities to up-skill our people and develop our town centres as best we can, but we need to have that funding matched pound for pound by the Westminster Government.

The Committee’s report notes the challenging economic environment in which town centres and high streets are operating. Given those challenges, we cannot ignore the impact of Brexit, which I believe will only make things worse. The British Retail Consortium recently warned: “A no-deal Brexit means the public will face higher prices and less choice on the shelves. British businesses desperately need certainty about the UK’s future trading relationship with the EU and will be severely disadvantaged by a no deal.”

I do not know whether there will be any change in that respect, given today’s Tory leadership election results; we live in hope. The consortium also pointed out that a no-deal outcome in October would disrupt retailers at one of the busiest times of the year, as they stock up for black Friday and Christmas. This week it noted a six-year low for retail footfall in May, due to political uncertainty around Brexit deterring shoppers.

Brexit uncertainty has also had a detrimental effect on workforce availability for many high street businesses, particularly in hospitality, where there is a high reliance on EU nationals for labour. In her response, can the Minister address what action is being taken to protect our town centres from the catastrophic consequences of a no-deal Brexit?

I take this opportunity to share some of the initiatives being pursued in my own constituency. I will link them to the Committee’s report as best I can. I pay tribute to Dunfermline Delivers for the outstanding work it has done over the last 10 years, as manager of the Dunfermline business improvement district. The work it does is truly remarkable. I am sure every hon. Member will have examples of how BIDs have been instrumental in improving town centres.

Like most town centres, Dunfermline suffered a serious decline in retail as online shopping became more important but, as the hon. Member for Bedford (Mohammad Yasin) suggested, we found it was time to fight back. He mentioned the 74 businesses that came together to try to improve things, and that it is exactly what happened in our town as well. We had the same empty shops and closure signs around our town centre. Luckily, we had been protected by some bigger retailers, including Marks & Spencer and Debenhams, which decided not to leave the town; we are thankful they made the good business decision to remain. In fact, town centre vacancy rates have actually dropped from 17% in 2014 to 14% in 2018. We would all like to see that trend in all the constituencies represented here today.

I believe that the drop in Dunfermline vacancy rates is in no small part thanks to the efforts of Dunfermline Delivers to maintain footfall in the town. It has been working hard to diversify what the town has to offer. For example, we have one of the biggest fireworks displays in Scotland, attracting 40,000 visitors every year, as well as a popular food and craft weekend.

My personal favourite is the Outwith festival, which is run by Dunfermline Delivers in conjunction with local organisations Avocado Sweet, Firestation Creative and Write Rammy. Now in its third year, the Outwith festival has enjoyed phenomenal success, with over 7,000 attendees across four days in 2018. The festival organises a range of entertainment from music to comedy to dance, and has a real family-friendly feel. Crucially, it brings people into the town centre, where they can take advantage of other retail, historical and cultural offers we can give. With a 98% satisfaction rate among festival goers last year, it is no surprise that the festival will return bigger and better this year. I am glad that the Committee endorses the fact that the issue is not just about retail—there needs to be a full mix of entertainment, a sense of place and places for people to go to enjoy the town centre, so it can allow itself to regenerate.

That is a real success story, as are other BIDs around the country. I encourage the Minister to consider how she can support town centre organisations to recreate that kind of success. I have given examples—I am sure others can as well—and we can learn from each other, to make sure we are all pulling in the same direction.

Dunfermline has also tried to succeed in attracting small, niche businesses to the town centre in recent years; the Happy Earth Place and Little Shop of Heroes are two examples. Last year I visited the Sew Studio, which had recently expanded into a second retail unit on the High Street, diversifying its sewing supplies shop to offer sewing and crafting classes. It is a real hub that helps the town centre feel more vibrant.

The Committee’s inquiry pertains to areas that are devolved matters, but I hope Members appreciate the value of comparing approaches in constituent parts of the UK, working towards what is a clearly a common problem. In our support for town centres, we really are all in this together. I have heard some great ideas that I will take back to my constituency. I wish the Committee well in pursuing its recommendations and look forward to hearing a positive way forward from the Minister.

2.37 pm

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Stringer. I thank the Committee, its members and its staff for the excellent report. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts) on securing
this debate and on his opening remarks, which were wide-ranging, informative and comprehensive, as well as excellently delivered. I thank all the hon. Members here for a reasoned debate, delivered in a good atmosphere, considering shared concerns about the future of our high streets at this important time.

This week, Arcadia, one of the biggest retailers in the country, narrowly avoided a collapse, which would have put 18,000 jobs at risk. Even so, Arcadia workers still face 50 shop closures and 1,000 job losses; my hon. Friend the Member for Bedford (Mohammad Yasin) highlighted some of the impacts of that on his constituency. Arcadia will not be the last retail group to struggle. Too few retail magnates have not given sufficient thought to the long-term sustainability of their retail groups, leaving workers and consumers to pay the price. Mike Ashley is as successful in his self-proclaimed role of ‘saviour of the high street’ as he was in selling Newcastle United. The Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee has compared working conditions in Sports Direct to “a Victorian workhouse.” That is not the kind of high street we want to see.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes) highlighted, the identity of our towns and cities is wrapped up with the retail sector, which is the largest private sector employer in the UK, employing one in 10 of our workforce. When I walk down Northumberland Street or through Eldon Square in Newcastle and see the vibrant mix of consumers and traders, I am grateful that my city centre appears to be weathering a very difficult trading environment; but that cannot be said for all cities and especially not for our towns.

Indeed, as this report highlights, there are often differences within towns. My hon. Friend the Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell) spoke about some of the innovative practices that some businesses on her high street were using to attract more foot flow. In Newcastle, Grainger market, our Victorian gem, is putting on tea parties and gastronomic delights in order to do the same thing.

What this review tells us is that, if our town centres are to survive to 2030, they must be grounded in community. Local authorities have a responsibility for the economic and social wellbeing of the places and communities they serve, but the scale of the issue demands action from central Government to ensure that our local authorities have the necessary powers to do their job, as hon. Members on both sides have emphasised. That must be backed by proper funding—much, much more than the pitiful £1.2 million put into the regeneration pilot in 2017. Our high streets and town centres anchor our local economies and offer jobs, services and a sense of place, but that is declining year on year. Every retail location type—high streets, retail parks, shopping centres—saw the number of occupied units decline at a faster rate in 2018 than in 2017. The high street vacancy rate rose from 11.2% to 11.5%; in retail parks it jumped from 4.9% in 2017 to 7.1% in 2018. There are 50,000 empty shops in the UK. In shopping centres, 6% of empty space has been empty for two years. On the high street, that figure is 5%. There have also been more than 100,000 job losses in retail over the past three years alone.

Some people say it is inevitable that online shopping will kill the high street, but it is wrong to think that the rise in internet retail equals empty shops and job losses. The impact of technology on our society involves political choices, and in this case the impact is due to Government inaction. As we see in this report, many shoppers still enjoy shopping as an experience; the most successful high streets are those with a good mix of retail, leisure and services, which provide a vibrant community space, not just a collection of businesses.

Under this Government, we have seen chronic under-investment in infrastructure, particularly outside London and the south-east. For example, the north-east receives less than one third of London’s transport spending per capita. According to the Local Government Association, outside London we have lost 117 million miles of bus routes—nearly half of all council-subsidised services—since Tory austerity began in 2011.

Every month, 60 bank branches and 250 free cash machines close, with devastating effects on access to cash in rural areas, and despite repeated promises to safeguard our post offices, we face 2,500 potential closures over the next year. We welcome today’s announcement by UK Finance that the banking sector will work to support people’s free access to cash, but it is not enough. Will the Minister take note, follow Labour’s lead and ban automated teller machine charges?

This Government have not only failed to take action but repeatedly ignored their own warnings. Despite the recommendations of this report, they have chosen to extend permitted development rules, which, as we have heard from many hon. Members, can effectively depopulate town centres in the day, which has an impact on retail and restaurants and makes it harder to enforce high standards for new homes. Will the Minister take note and suspend any further extension of permitted development, as hon. Members have called for?

In their response to this report, the Government refuse to recognise that online retailers should be contributing more. The system is past its sell-by date, having been “designed in 1990, when businesses made money in a very different way.”

Those are not my words, but those of the Conservative Mayor of the West Midlands, Andy Street, who understands that high street retailers are being crippled by an outdated business rates system and has called for online retailers to pay more tax—as indeed have hon. Members such as the hon. Member for Hertford and Stortford (Mr Prisk) today.

The Tories have failed our high streets, failed our retail sector, and failed our economy. They have no claim to be the party of business. As the hon. Member for Dunfermline and West Fife (Douglas Chapman) highlighted, a no-deal Brexit would be catastrophic for businesses, extending that failure and wrecking many of the businesses on our high streets and in the retail sector. I ask the Minister to rule out a no-deal Brexit—[Interruption.] I am sure it is within her pay grade to do that. Will she at least say that she will not support a Conservative candidate who supports a no-deal Brexit?

Labour’s industrial strategy will rebuild our economy for the many. Unlike this Government, we care about every part of the economy. As part of our “innovation mission,” we will raise productivity and job quality in sectors such as construction, agriculture and retail that have been wholly neglected by the Government’s industrial strategy. Labour would fund a new catapult
centre to boost the take-up of innovation in the retail sector, creating higher wages and better jobs on high streets across the country.

Our high streets are reaching crisis point, which is why Labour has an emergency five-point plan to resurrect and rebuild our town centres. I will finish with that plan. First, we will ban ATM charges and stop post office and bank branch closures. Secondly, we will provide free bus travel for under-25s. Thirdly, we will roll out free public wi-fi in town centres, so that we have networked centres that encourage people to spend their time as well as their money. Fourthly, we will establish a register of landlords of empty shops in each local authority, making it easier to bring shops back into use. Finally, we will introduce an annual reevaluation of business rates, ensure a fairer appeals system and review the business rates system to bring it into the 21st century.

Labour’s plan will revive and reinvigorate our high streets, which must urgently adapt. We will take the urgent action required; will the Government follow in our plan and commit real resources to ensuring that our town centres can survive and thrive?

**Graham Stringer (in the Chair):** Before I call the Minister, I will say two things. First, my notes said that the Minister was Kit Malthouse, but you are no less welcome for being unexpected, Minister. Secondly, can I ask you to leave a short space of time at the end of your speech for the Chair of the Committee to wind up?

2.48 pm

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Mrs Heather Wheeler):** Absolutely, Mr Stringer. I am Heather Wheeler, just in case anyone had not worked that out. The other Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government, my hon. Friend the hon. Member for Rossendale and Darwen (Jake Berry), should have been responding, but sadly he is at a funeral today. It is therefore my pleasure to respond to the debate. Clearly, my 16-minute speech is going to go nowhere, as I am leaving time for the Committee’s Chair to reply. As always, Mr Stringer, it is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship.

I thank all members of the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee who are present for their cross-party report into high streets and town centres for working with the Government to support the sustainable transformation of our high streets. We are pleased that the report broadly recognises the Government’s measures to instigate structural change, and we agree with the diagnosis that local places are best placed to know what their local solutions are—with appropriate support from central Government. It is a helpful report and, as has been said, we have broadly accepted its recommendations. Although I cannot cover everything in the short time available, I hope that hon. Members present will see how the Government are pursuing a holistic package of measures to transform our high streets and town centres for the long term.

Last year was particularly challenging for UK retailers, bringing into question traditional success models for towns and high streets. Quick to respond, in July 2018 the Government commissioned an expert panel, bringing together a wealth of expertise from the retail, property and design sectors. Chaired by Sir John Timpson, it explored the question that brings us here today: how do we catalyse change and ensure that town centres across the country adapt and thrive for future generations?

Our package includes a £675 million future high streets fund to support local areas in England to invest in town centre infrastructure, to make a real difference to the underlying structure of the high street. This demonstrates our commitment to taking long-term action to help high streets and town centres evolve through investment to improve town centres. We thank the Committee for commending our work in this area and echo its sentiments. We are currently considering more than 300 expressions of interest, and we have placed significant weighting on local leadership, vision and strategic ambition when assessing the bids. The places progressing to the second stage of the fund and receiving revenue funding to support the development of their plans will be announced later this summer.

As the hon. Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts) said, business rates are a bone of contention. Since the 2016 Budget, we have introduced a range of business rates measures in England worth more than £13 billion over the next five years. This includes the announcement in the 2018 Budget to take a third off eligible retailers’ bills for two years from April 2019, which is worth an estimated £1 billion alone. We have also doubled small business rate relief from 50% to 100% for eligible businesses, resulting in more than 655,000 small businesses—one third of occupiers—paying no business rates at all.

Alongside that we have committed to a £435 million package to support ratepayers facing the steepest increases following the 2017 revaluation. Finally, we switched the annual indexation of business rates from the retail prices index to the consumer prices index, representing a cut in business rates every year for all ratepayers. That alone will save all businesses almost £6 billion over the next five years.

**Rachael Maskell:** Will the Minister give way?

**Mrs Wheeler:** It will have to be very quick.

**Rachael Maskell:** I will be brief. Will the Minister commit to going back and scoping out the possibility of a turnover tax?

**Mrs Wheeler:** The hon. Lady is obviously prescient. When the Government concluded the last fundamental review of business rates, we decided to keep business rates as a property tax, following stakeholder responses. Respondents agreed that business rates are easy to collect, difficult to avoid, relatively stable and clearly linked with local authority spending. Some respondents suggested alternative tax bases. However, Select Committee members and others may wish to know that there was no consensus on an alternative base, and that even those respondents who put forward alternatives were clear that they were not without issues. To finish on business rates, the Government are committed to listening to views and will keep all taxes under review.

**Helen Hayes:** Will the Minister give way?
Mrs Wheeler: I have not got time.

Helen Hayes: I will be extremely brief. This issue is killing businesses across the country now. I am afraid that saying the Government generally keep it under review, along with all other taxes, simply does not cut it for businesses in our town centres.

Mrs Wheeler: I have outlined how the Government are helping local businesses with many, many millions of pounds, and with £6 billion-worth of relief, so I think the hon. Lady is slightly over-egging it.

Another issue that has been highlighted is our undertaking a planning consultation on permitted development rights to help support change on the high street. Permitted development rights continue to play an important role in the planning system, supporting key Government agendas such as housing and high streets by providing more planning certainty while allowing for local consideration of key planning matters.

To put the hon. Member for Sheffield South East’s mind at rest on local plans and permitted development rights, where a local planning authority considers it necessary to protect a local amenity or the wellbeing of an area, it can consult the local community by removing a right by making an article 4 direction. Proposals for development can change, and a change of use would require a planning permission application.

Equally, on the point from the hon. Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes) about poor quality homes being delivered through permitted development rights, permitted development rights have actually provided 46,000 really important homes that needed to be built. However, we are particularly keen to ensure that the quality of all new homes meets our ambitions, so in the spring statement we announced a review of permitted development rights for the conversion of buildings to residential properties, in respect of the quality and standard of homes.

Because the Government believe in the high street, we run the Great British High Street awards, with Visa, to celebrate the achievements of our communities and high streets. The awards are a great way of bringing together local players and focusing minds on high streets. In entering the awards, local authorities, businesses and communities work together and get local people talking about their high street, letting local leadership emerge. Last month, I was delighted to launch the 2019 competition in Crickhowell, the town that took the top prize in 2018. I am sure that the hon. Member for Sheffield South East will do so again.

2.58 pm

Mr Betts: I thank all hon. Members for their contributions, and particularly members of the Select Committee, whom I also thank for agreeing this report unanimously. We did very well: it was 45 minutes before Brexit was mentioned and 70 minutes before Mike Ashley was mentioned.

We started off with failures of retail, whether British Home Stores, which is gone, or House of Fraser, which is restructuring, and we subsequently heard about Arcadia, Marks & Spencer and Debenhams closing stores and small businesses going out of business altogether. We looked at a situation that could get worse, with some high streets failing completely, but then we looked at the possibilities for the future. We recommend that all stakeholders get together, including local councils, Government, retailers and landlords. We can have a brighter future by changing the nature of the high street, with changing uses—coffee shops, leisure, open spaces, public services and residential—all being brought in, led by the local authorities with BIDs through their local planning processes, involving their local communities and businesses in a package.

We also said that there has to be a level playing field for retail, which will still be an important part of the high street. We held our inquiry after all the Government’s initiatives on business rates had been brought in, and no one who gave evidence said that they were sufficient. That is the reality. The Government simply have to go away and look again at the possibility of alternatives, such as an online sales tax. They should read the excellent report from Tesco that said how this could be done and how it could benefit the high street.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved

That this House has considered the Eleventh Report of the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee, High Streets and town centres in 2030, HC 1010, and the Government response, CP 84.
Jewish Community: Contribution to the UK

[Sir David Amess in the Chair]

3 pm

Christian Matheson (City of Chester) (Lab): I beg to move.

That this House has considered the contribution of the Jewish Community to the UK.

It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship again, Sir David. I originally sought this debate following a conversation with my friend Marc Levy of the Jewish Leadership Council, and let me say at the outset what an excellent ambassador he is for the Jewish community. When we first discussed the idea, I was not keen on it; I did not see its relevance because when I look at people, it would not necessarily occur to me whether they were Jewish or not.

Let me give some examples, using my colleagues. I see that my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent North (Ruth Smeeth) is in her place. I know that she is Jewish, but when I think of her, I think of a woman who has been a friend of mine for 20 years, of somebody who is a trade unionist and primarily of somebody who has made a real contribution to and developed a real expertise in defence policy.

I knew that my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Riverside (Dame Louise Ellman) was Jewish, but I think of her first as somebody who gave real leadership in local government for many years before she came here and gave leadership in the Select Committee on Transport. Whether she was Jewish or not was not a factor for me.

Let me mention some other colleagues. I was not even aware that my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds North West (Alex Sobel) and my right hon. Friend the Member for Barking (Dame Margaret Hodge) were Jewish until they started to receive antisemitic abuse. I was not aware, nor would it even have crossed my mind, that my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds West (Rachel Reeves) was Jewish until they started to receive antisemitic abuse. I was not aware, nor would it even have crossed my mind, that my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Riverside (Dame Louise Ellman) was Jewish, but I think of her first as somebody who gave real leadership in local government for many years before she came here and gave leadership in the Select Committee on Transport. Whether she was Jewish or not was not a factor for me.

Let me mention some other colleagues. I was not even aware that my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds North West (Alex Sobel) and my right hon. Friend the Member for Barking (Dame Margaret Hodge) were Jewish until they started to receive antisemitic abuse. I was not aware, nor would it even have crossed my radar: I would not even have considered it. However, I would have considered my hon. Friend’s work on environmentalism and my right hon. Friend’s service not only as a Minister for many years, but as Chair of the Public Accounts Committee.

As Marc explained to me, there is a feeling among Jewish groups that too many headlines recently have been negative. Jewish groups understandably feel under threat, be it from a rising right-wing, nationalist and racist populism in eastern Europe, from President Putin talking about Jews controlling the world banking system, from President Trump’s failure to denounce protestors in the USA chanting, “Jews will not replace us,” or—let us be clear—from a sense and fears that my own party has elements that have expressed antisemitic remarks or statements and that complaints about those have not been dealt with sufficiently quickly or robustly.

However, instead of all the negative stories about Jewish people—negativity, I hasten to add, that they themselves are not responsible for—it was time to have a celebration of the contribution of the Jewish people to our society; to reset the dial to the positive; to shine the spotlight on the positive news stories about things that go on every day but get squeezed out by the more unpleasant stuff; and to remind ourselves again not just of the quality or even the quantity of the Jewish contribution to the UK, but of the length of that contribution.

Obviously, I am not Jewish myself—I doubt there are many Jews whose first name is Christian. In fact, growing up in a Cheshire village, I had never knowingly met any Jewish people until I went to secondary school in Manchester, which has one of the largest Jewish populations outside London. I recall that at that school we had the Sieff theatre, named after Israel Sieff, a former chairman of Marks & Spencer, and paid for by his family. That was the first example of Jewish philanthropy that I had come across.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on the speech that he is making. He has mentioned the Jewish community in Manchester, so would he like to take the opportunity, with me, to celebrate the interfaith work of the Muslim Jewish Forum of Greater Manchester?

Christian Matheson: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. If she will permit me, I will return to that issue shortly.

The UK has a long-established Jewish community: the first record of Jewish settlement dates from 1070. There was a continual Jewish presence in the country until King Edward’s Edict of Expulsion, dated 1290. Sadly, therefore, we can also date UK antisemitism from around that period. Following the expulsion, there was no Jewish community apart from those who practised secretly.

Towards the middle of the 17th century, a considerable number of Marrano merchants settled in London and formed a secret congregation. That was until the time of Oliver Cromwell, who never officially re-admitted the Jewish community. However, a small colony was identified in 1656 and allowed to remain. In 1701, Bevis Marks Synagogue opened in London. It is the oldest continually used synagogue in London. The Board of Deputies of British Jews, the main Jewish representative body, was established in 1760.

In 1837, Queen Victoria knighted Moses Haim Montefiore. Four years later, Isaac Lyon Goldsmid was made a baronet; he was the first Jew to receive a hereditary title. The first Jewish Lord Mayor of London, Sir David Salomons, was elected in 1855. That was followed by the 1858 emancipation of the Jews. On 26 July 1858, Lionel de Rothschild was finally allowed to sit in the British House of Commons when the law restricting the oath of office to Christians was changed.

Owing to the lack of anti-Jewish violence in Britain in the 19th century, it acquired a reputation for religious tolerance and attracted significant immigration from eastern Europe. Of the eastern European Jewish emigrants, 1.9 million headed to the United States and about 140,000 to Britain. Some growing antisemitism during the 1930s was counterbalanced by strong support for British Jews in their local communities, leading to events such as the battle of Cable Street, where antisemitism was strongly resisted by Jews and their neighbours. They fought it out as a united community on the street against fascist elements.

Ruth Smeeth (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Lab): Will my hon. Friend give way?
Christian Matheson: I will always give way to my hon. Friend.

Ruth Smeeth: As my hon. Friend is touching on the battle of Cable Street, I feel that I should put on the record my pride that my grandmother spent the 48 hours in the run-up to the battle of Cable Street—she lived in the east end of London—putting razor blades into tomatoes to throw at Nazis. I take a great deal of pleasure in being able to contribute to such an important debate, because the Jewish contribution to British life has had many different forms.

Christian Matheson: That contribution has had many different and, dare I say it, honourable forms when it comes to dealing with Nazis. I am most grateful to my hon. Friend for that intervention.

As we recall the 75th anniversary of D-day and the battle of Normandy, let us remember the more than 60,000 Jews who served in the British armed forces during the second world war; they included 14,000 in the Royal Air Force and 15,000 in the Royal Navy. Some 30,000 Jews from Palestine also served in the British military. Five Jewish soldiers have won the Victoria Cross. Some 4,000 took part in the D-day landings.

Today, there are about 290,000 Jewish people in the UK across all walks of life. According to the 2011 census, British Jewry is overwhelmingly English, with only about 5,900 Jews in Scotland, 2,100 in Wales and fewer than 200 in Northern Ireland. There are just 90 or so in my constituency. I am always pleased to tell the House that I am particularly proud of the role that Jews played in the growth of the trade union movement and the founding of the Labour party. The Jewish community was instrumental in setting up trade unions. The “Jewish Encyclopedia” of 1906 lists 39 Jewish unions set up between 1882 and 1902. The London Jewish Bakers’ Union was created in 1905 as the International Bakers’ Union—members came from Germany, Poland, Russia and elsewhere—and continued until 1970; it was the longest lived Jewish union. Poale Zion was the forerunner of today’s Jewish Labour Movement and was one of the early affiliates to my party in its nascent years.

The Jewish community is also loyal, despite what racists may claim. Every week at the synagogue, on the Sabbath, a prayer is said for the Queen. It begins:

“Our Sovereign Lady, Queen Elizabeth, Philip, Duke of Edinburgh, Charles, Prince of Wales, and all the Royal Family. May the supreme King of kings in His mercy preserve the Queen in life, guard her and deliver her from all trouble and sorrow. May He bless and protect Her Majesty’s Armed Forces.”

As much as I used to enjoy going to the all-night Jewish bagel bakery in Brick Lane in London when I was a student years ago, it is worth recording that our national dish—fish and chips—is probably a Jewish import. It is thought that fried fish was first introduced into Britain by Jewish refugees from Portugal and Spain in the 16th century. The first fish and chip shop was opened by a Jewish immigrant, Joseph Malin, in Cleveland Street in London.

I wish to focus on two areas of Jewish life today: first, the contribution to and delivery of social policy. Reform Judaism has led policy development work on loneliness and isolation. It launched the programme with a conference in March 2018. Reform Judaism holds quarterly networking meetings with volunteers and staff to share ideas and best practice and to hear about innovative projects and practices in other communities and beyond. Inclusion and wellbeing are considered on all events, and Reform Judaism’s forthcoming conference will focus on mental health and wellbeing.

Reform communities deliver their own programmes and activities, which include many opportunities to combat loneliness and isolation. Most communities offer befriending schemes, welcoming new members and visitors to synagogue and buddy for people who might need support to join activities or services. Communities phone members at significant points of the year—Jewish holidays, birthdays, anniversaries, or at times of bereavement—and use that as a chance to foster links and bring people who might be lonely into the community.

Some communities are also able to offer transport, which can be a significant factor in social isolation. Lunch clubs, dementia cafes, afternoon teas, bereavement support groups and Jewish festivals are opportunities to bring people together and foster social links. Communities have intergenerational projects such as singing with toddlers and the elderly or teams teaching older people how to use technology. Such projects are across the UK at many Reform synagogues.

The Jewish Leadership Council has promoted social care activities undertaken by ex-members who work with the most vulnerable in society and create an environment in which the elderly in the Jewish community can live independently where appropriate.

Ruth Smeeth: Many different forms of support are given to the elderly within the Jewish community, primarily provided by Jewish Care, among others. Does my hon. Friend agree with me that the day centre in Hendon, which focuses on holocaust survivors in their final days, is a wonderful addition that would not be provided by the state? That shows the value of organisations such as Jewish Care.

Christian Matheson: I am most grateful for my hon. Friend’s intervention. There is a strong culture of supporting the family and others within the Jewish community, but anything that helps to support holocaust survivors and also reminds us of what they and their families went through, so that we can remind future generations, is very important.

Over the past 12 months, the JLC has undertaken an elderly care review to look into all its social care organisations so that they can work with the elderly and see how, strategically as a community, they can create a cohesive and effective link between organisations and best enable them to be effective in their aims and missions.

Mitzvah Day is a body that promotes an inclusive day of social action. Its aim is to bring people together through Jewish-led social action, and its work contributes...
in various ways. Volunteering itself is a powerful way for people who are isolated or disconnected from others to come together. Taking part in Mitzvah Day is an easy and accessible way to join a group of volunteers to support local community projects and needs. It not only allows for volunteers to feel connected and useful, but for the beneficiaries to connect to local community volunteers and to establish friendships. Mitzvah Day has demonstrated a substantial repeat effect, with volunteers returning year on year to run Mitzvah Day projects, and with volunteers continuing to volunteer throughout the year.

The second area that I wish to look at—my hon. Friend the Member for Stretford and Urmston (Kate Green) touched on this—is community cohesion. I wish to refer specifically to the work of the Community Security Trust, which was set up to protect Jewish communities and Jewish groups from violence, attacks, intimidation and worse. The CST has spread out to use its expertise, developed over two decades, to support other community groups, including Muslim community groups who also face hatred, violence and threats.

CST co-runs several initiatives that encourage and improve community integration, including Stand Up! Education Against Discrimination, which aims to empower young people in mainstream schools to learn about and act against discrimination, racism, antisemitism and anti-Muslim hatred, while developing their social responsibility in the community. The project is led by Streetwise, a partnership between CST and Maccabi GB, another membership organisation, and is supported by Tell MAMA, Kick It Out and Galop. Given a 29% rise in the number of hate crimes in 2017 in the UK, including anti-Muslim hate and antisemitism, the interactive free-of-charge workshops aim to educate young people about tolerance and social responsibility, giving them skills to counter discrimination while ensuring their personal safety.

Framed within a broad conversation about the Equality Act 2010 and British values, Stand Up! currently employs two facilitators from Jewish and Muslim backgrounds, modelling a partnership of interfaith collaboration and demonstrating how groups that are often perceived as oppositional can work together successfully. The workshop combines Streetwise's and Maccabi GB's experience in delivering informal personal development sessions to tens of thousands of young people in schools nationwide with expertise in monitoring and recording antisemitic, anti-Muslim, racist, and LGBT+ hate incidents of the other partner organisations: the CST, Tell MAMA, Kick It Out and Galop. The Stand Up! project launched in January 2017 and has since gone from strength to strength, delivering sessions to more than 8,000 young people, and booking sessions in 48 schools and settings to date.

The Jewish community has a great story to tell.

**Kate Green:** Will my hon. Friend give way?

**Christian Matheson:** I will.

**Kate Green:** I am grateful to my hon. Friend. I sense he is moving on towards the end of his speech, but, before he does, I want to ask him to commend another interfaith initiative, Nisa-Nashim, which brings together Jewish and Muslim women across the country in social action, mutual learning and sharing of enjoyable leisure activities. I am sure he will agree that that repeats the message of the strength of the partnerships that the Jewish community forms with those of other faiths, and of no faith.

**Christian Matheson:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right. We could be here all afternoon simply listing the different organisations and schemes that Jewish community groups run either on their own or with other community groups. Many of them slip under the radar, but none of them fails to have an impact.

**Chi Onwurah** (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for giving way and also for his excellent opening speech. If it had one fault, it was that it did not mention Newcastle, which I shall now do. I grew up in Newcastle, and, like him, I did so not understanding enough about the contribution of the Jewish community to a great city.

I was surprised and encouraged when I learned about the contribution of Herbert Loebl, who, like me, was an electrical engineer. He came to Newcastle at the age of 16 in 1940 and built some of our great high-tech businesses, which still make a contribution to our economy today. Newcastle might have a small Jewish community, but it makes a brilliant and strong economic contribution to our city now, just as it did in the past.

**Christian Matheson:** I am most grateful to my hon. Friend for reminding us that the contributions of members of the Jewish community can be found everywhere and in every walk of life.

The Jewish community has a great story to tell. Far from being insular, it is integrated, as we have just heard, and is integral to our society. Its members are generous with time, spirit and philanthropic giving, but once again the Jewish community feels under threat. It seems that as soon as there is the first sign of society's cohesion breaking down, antisemitism returns and is one of the first signs of that breakdown. We must deal with that racism head on, but we must also deal with it by remembering and welcoming the Jewish community's massive, positive contribution, individually and through collective groups. I, for one, am grateful for their contribution to our nation.

3.19 pm

**Ruth Smeeth** (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Lab): It is a pleasure to participate in the debate under your chairmanship, Sir David. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for City of Chester (Christian Matheson)—my friend and colleague—for calling the debate, and for his incredible speech, which outlined the contribution of my family and community.

It has been an interesting experience being a Jewish parliamentarian over the past three years, but I am reminded on a daily basis of the contribution that my family have made. I rarely get to say nice things about being Jewish in the United Kingdom, and typically have to say more horrible things, so perhaps the House will indulge me slightly as I tell my family story, and how we ended up here. Much of it was referenced by my hon. Friend the Member for City of Chester.
I am the great-granddaughter of Jewish immigrants who arrived here from Russia and Poland, fleeing pogroms. They had fled persecution, but arrived as economic migrants in the east end of London—among the more than 140,000 that my hon. Friend mentioned. My great-grandfather started a Yiddish-speaking Jewish trade union branch, which is now part of Unite the union. They had a wonderful daughter, who became my grandmother. She desperately wanted my mother and me never to know anything she got up to as a young woman and political activist, because she did not want to give us ideas.

Christian Matheson: That worked out well.

Ruth Smeeth: It did not work out well for her or anybody.

I learned much of this history only recently, because of events that have happened. Not only was my grandmother at the battle of Cable Street, including helping with preparations for it, but she taught me my first political song. When she was eight she participated in her first political campaign, going around the streets of the east end of London campaigning for Harry Gosling: “Vote, vote, vote for Harry Gosling.” At that point the Jewish community could not afford leaflets. No community could afford them. It was all done by children singing to get the vote out on polling day. It sounds much more appealing than my get-out-the-vote operation at a general election.

My grandmother was definitely a visionary, and ahead of her time. In 1936, as well as participating in Cable Street, she took food and socks and went to meet the Jarrow marchers when they arrived in London at the end of their march. That is not something necessarily to be expected of an immigrant Jewish woman living in poverty in central London. She was definitely our matriarch and instilled in our family everything that has led me here today. When my mother was a single mum, working full time, my grandmother was my carer. On a Wednesday afternoon all the little old ladies on her council estate in the east end of London would arrive at her flat, and she would feed everyone tea. She could read and write so well that they all arrived with their letters and she did what I would now call casework for them. She was extraordinary, and because of her my mother became the boss of my hon. Friends the Member for City of Chester and for York Central (Rachael Maskell); she became a trade union deputy general secretary. I feel that between the two of them I am very much in a family.

Our story, beyond the fact that, like many in this place I am a third-generation immigrant, could be told by many different people across my community, but it gave me my values. The extraordinary women in my family participated in the history that my hon. Friend the Member for City of Chester talked about. They definitely cooked a great deal, but they got me here. Many in my family also served. My great uncle Bozzy died on D-day. My grandfather fought at Monte Cassino. We are British to our core, and have never been anything other than British until recent days when being Jewish became a secondary factor. I am grateful, as are my family, that we ended up here and not in America by accident. I am grateful for everything that this country has done, and every opportunity that has been afforded to my family and all the others who arrived.

There is someone else I want to mention. I am not the first Jewish Member of Parliament for my great city. Barnett Stross was the first Jewish Member of Parliament for Stoke-on-Trent. My hon. Friend the Member for City of Chester touched on the subject of Jewish philanthropy, and it was because of Barnett Stross that we helped to rebuild Lidice after the war. My city of miners helped to rebuild another city of miners. The Jewish community has made contributions to our country at every level, whether political or community, as has every other faith and immigrant community here. We are not special. We are just part of a wonderful society that I am grateful to represent in this place.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): There appears to be a little time, Sir David, and I am grateful to be able to make a short contribution. I particularly want to speak about the work of World Jewish Relief, because I spend quite a lot of time in Parliament looking at policies on, and support for, refugees and refugee projects. I commend the work of World Jewish Relief for refugees arriving in this country.

Many of us have learned a great deal about the importance of refugee welcome by listening to the stories of refugees from appalling attacks and persecution and, ultimately, the holocaust—still remembered by my parents’ generation. We have learned particularly poignantly from colleagues such as my noble Friend Lord Dubs, who has talked about his experience as a child refugee. That has enormously enriched the debates that we have today about the plight of modern refugees fleeing to our country. My interest in refugee policy is at the practical end; about what can be done to support people arriving here. World Jewish Relief offers an exemplary programme, to which I should like to draw the House’s attention.

The programme recognises that refugees are desperate to integrate and make their homes in the country that welcomes them: to become part of their community—their friends and neighbours. We all know that one of the most important places where we can integrate and become part of a community, and feel that we are playing our part as community members, is the workplace. That is why I want to draw the House’s attention in particular to World Jewish Relief projects to support refugees into employment. It is not easy for a refugee to move into employment. Although many arrive here highly skilled and qualified, the persecution and trauma that they have experienced may make their re-entry to employment difficult. They might have to learn a new language and requalify in a new system of professional qualifications or skills recognition. Of course, they also have to overcome and deal with the trauma that brought them to this country.

World Jewish Relief helps with all that. It helps people to learn English, if they need to, and to reskill. It helps them to obtain the necessary recognition of their qualifications and it helps to reintroduce them to the workplace. It recognises that different individuals will be at a different place on the journey and that, for some, a return to work in any foreseeable future is probably unimaginable; but it does not drop them. It continues to offer them support, care and encouragement. To date 250 refugees have been helped into employment. Sixty-six are receiving other forms of support through the specialist training and employment programme. The programme is supported and funded by a range of Jewish institutions.
and private donors and by a refugee taskforce that has been formed by a number of local, community and religious denominations that have wanted to support the work that World Jewish Relief does for refugees. That is supported by the Jewish Council for Racial Equality and it gives a much wider group of people the opportunity to participate in and support that worthwhile endeavour.

It is because I take a broad policy interest in refugee work that I have come to know about the work of World Jewish Relief, but in fact it is close on our doorstep in the north of England. I particularly commend it for working with a group of people who present particular challenges as a result of the trauma and difficulties that they have experienced. I know that the friendships and relationships formed between the refugees and those supporting them will have enriched the lives of everyone involved. Once again, as we have heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent North (Ruth Smeeth) and other Jewish MPs, both online and offline.

We have seen much of that in recent years, including how I believe we need to respond to it. It affects people they can fall into disrepair. We then have to ask ourselves a more difficult question. Where does this come from? What is really driving it? I believe that there is a further, wider problem, which is about an overall anti-western sentiment, which combines hostility to Israel with being anti-American, and which creates a fertile ground for the sentiments. I do not believe that that anti-western sentiment is part of the Labour tradition. It has never been part of the policy or the outlook of any Labour Government. I believe that if we really want to deal with the issue in our party and on the left, we have to reject that anti-western sentiment as well. These sentiments do not come from nowhere. We can do what we can about processes and complaints procedures and committees, but unless we are clear that our world view must not give rise to it, we will not really be able to deal with this issue.

I am disturbed by the antisemitism on the left. It is important that we stand strongly against it, that we do not accept any world view that gives rise to it, and that we state clearly that we are a party of all faiths and none. Britain's great strength as a country is that it is a country for all faiths and none. Britain's great strength as a country is that it is a country for all faiths and none. That is why we have been a refuge for the oppressed from around the world for so many years. That is why we are recognised as such around the world.

So, there should be no hierarchy of victimhood. There should be no sense that only some people are victims of racism and other people cannot be victims of racism. We have to reject these things and appreciate that we are admired around the world precisely because we have been, for the most part, a refuge for people fleeing from persecution. We have given people a platform to build new lives. It is not a perfect story—it never is, and of course there have been times and episodes when

Some of it is wrapped up in a debate about the middle east and about Israel and Palestine and so on, but there is no need for it to be so. To state some obvious truths, the Israeli Prime Minister and the Israeli Government are not the same thing as Israeli society. There is an open and active debate in that country about policy, about settlements, about peace and about direction. Millions of Israeli citizens who take very contrasting views on those issues participate in that debate on a daily basis.

**Ruth Smeeth:** One of the most fascinating things about the debate in our party at the moment is that when we look at politics in the middle east, and specifically in Israel, my family who live in Israel campaign against Netanyahu day in, day out, and yet I am held responsible for his actions over here.

**Mr McFadden:** That is a very good illustration of my point. It is just the same as the fact that in this country we have a Government and a Prime Minister—perhaps a new one soon—and millions of our own citizens will disagree with the Government or the policies they pursue.

It is also the case that there are many people who care passionately about the Palestinian cause, who want to see a Palestinian state and who want to see a better deal for the Palestinian people. They can argue that case with passion and conviction, without being antisemitic. Many people do that on a daily basis. Caring about those issues does not mean that there is a need to engage in antisemitism.

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that has not been the case—but it is largely true. Over the long arc of history, it is the story of how our society has developed up to today.

We should give thanks to the Jewish community for the contribution that has been made over hundreds of years, in all walks of life, to the United Kingdom, and resolve anew that we believe in equality and in a politics and a country that can be a good home for people of all faiths and none.

3.37 pm

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): As always, it is a great pleasure to see you in the Chair and to serve under your chairmanship, Sir David. As hon. Members have done, I pay tribute to the hon. Member for City of Chester (Christian Matheson) for securing and opening the debate. I have the pleasure of winding up on behalf of the Scottish National party. Although it has been a very short debate, and not a lot of hon. Members are present, we have made up in quality for what we do not have in quantity.

I have come to know the hon. Member for City of Chester through a standing engagement. It used to be a weekly engagement, but it has now moved to monthly—one of the longest-running Public Bill Committees in this Parliament. Over the last year or so, I have come to know the hon. Gentleman, and I would have expected nothing less than for him to pay a typically warm tribute to the Jewish community in the UK. He gave an absolutely outstanding history and chronology of the UK’s Jewish community. He was right to mention that there are around 5,900 Jewish people in Scotland. They are largely based in the constituency of the hon. Member for East Renfrewshire (Paul Masterton), who I know would want to be here today but cannot be. I pay tribute to the close relationship he has with the Jewish community there.

As always, the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent North (Ruth Smeeth) spoke very powerfully. She spoke about her family’s history as immigrants from Poland and Russia. It certainly sounds like her grandmother would have been a fantastic person to spend time with, and the hon. Lady did her proud.

The hon. Member for Stretford and Urmston (Kate Green) is always a strong voice in this place for refugees, and she spoke about the work that World Jewish Relief does, particularly on moving people into employment.

The right hon. Member for Wolverhampton South East (Mr McFadden) made reference to the cemetery in his constituency. I, too, have a Jewish cemetery in my constituency. There is not much of a Jewish population in my constituency, all those headstones with a Star of David driving down one of the more significant streets in my constituency, Hallhill Road. Thankfully, it is kept very well. When driving down one of the more significant streets in my constituency, all those headstones with a Star of David on them are a reminder that Jews are such a massive part of the community. The right hon. Gentleman also spoke candidly about some of the challenges in the Labour party. I know that may not be an easy thing to do in the current climate. He was brave to raise how the diversity of modern Scotland, of the United Kingdom, should never be taken for granted. The Scottish National party could not be clearer that Scotland’s Jewish community needs to be assured and feel safe, against a worrying backdrop of growing antisemitism across Europe and further afield.

Like anyone who calls Scotland home, Scotland’s Jewish communities have the right to feel comfortable as they go about daily life free from intolerance, religious or antisemitic hatred. Following last year’s shocking attack in Pennsylvania, that is more important than ever. We utterly condemn without equivocation anyone who threatens the existence of Israel. Israel has a right to exist peacefully. The Israel-Palestine situation should not be used as some kind of justification for attacks on Jewish people or abuse towards Jewish people, as it seems to be now more than ever. Therefore, we condemn any attempt to do so and any expression of antisemitism.

Given the rise in reports of hate crimes and hate speech in the UK last June, and homophobic attacks, such as that in Orlando, as well as the antisemitic voices on the so-called alt-right, it is more important than ever to learn the lessons of the past. That is why we support work to tackle religious hatred and intolerance, including Scotland’s national commemoration of the holocaust and subsequent genocides, so that lessons are learned about what can happen if hatred and discrimination remain unchecked, and seep through into our society. The Scottish Government accept in full, without equivocation, the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance definition of antisemitism. It is disappointing that it has taken quite a long time for people to get on board with that.

I want to come back to the wider issue of freedom of religion and belief, which is essential for any democratic, functioning society. Whether we are Christians, Jews or Muslims, bringing faith communities around the table is key to building a cohesive, respectful society. We still have a lot more to do on that, even in 2019. Scottish Interfaith Week is an excellent example of how Scottish communities are working together to improve dialogue with one another on matters of religious, national and civic importance.

I want to finish my remarks, as I normally do, by bringing the topic back home to Glasgow East, and referring to one of my predecessors in this House. A few years ago, I had the real pleasure of visiting Glasgow’s Garnethill Synagogue, to look at some of the Jewish archives. Shamefully, it was only then that I began to learn more about Myer Galpern, who was the MP for my constituency, then Glasgow Shettleston, from 1959 to 1979. He was Deputy Speaker of the House of Commons during his last term in office. Myer Galpern was not only the first Jewish Lord Provost of Glasgow but the first Jewish Provost in Scotland. Sadly, that is a little known fact, which we should do more to recognise and celebrate in Glasgow. I will pursue that with Glasgow City Council.

In conclusion, the Jewish community made an enormous contribution to Scotland long before Myer Galpern, and I look forward to its continuing to make an enormous contribution to the rich, tartan tapestry of Scotland for many more years to come.

3.43 pm

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): It is always a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir David. I send my best wishes for a speedy recovery to my hon. Friend the Member for Bradford West
(Naz Shah), who was due to respond to the debate. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for City of Chester (Christian Matheson) for securing the debate. We have known each other for a significant amount of time—a couple of decades—and I can testify to how committed he is not only to celebrating diversity, but to furthering the rights and opportunities of all in society. He has done so today eloquently for our Jewish friends across the United Kingdom.

I was particularly moved by the family story of my hon. Friend. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent North (Ruth Smeeth), much of which I had not heard before. I have very fond memories of working with her mother, who was a tour de force in the trade union movement. My hon. Friend has proved to be that, too. Given the lineage from her grandmother, I can very much see where that comes from.

Today’s debate celebrates the incredible investment that the UK’s Jewish communities have made to our nation. If I may, for one moment I will highlight my own Jewish community in York. York’s Jewish community may be small, but it is fast-growing, and it is certainly growing in its impact on our city. Determined not to look back to the tragic massacre of Clifford’s Tower in 1190, the community is building a new story to be told in our city, marked by community action and an impressive contribution to York’s faith forum.

We heard earlier from the hon. Member for Glasgow East (David Linden) about the faith communities in Manchester and Glasgow, and the contribution that they can make to our communities. The work of the faith forum in York stands out across the country. This is not just about the Jewish community; the Muslim community is known for how they came out to greet the English Defence League with tea and biscuits when it marched in our city. They broke the anger and changed that situation, the like of which has not been seen in our city since.

Since I was elected, it has been a real honour to work with York’s Jewish community. In particular, Ben Rich has led significant dialogue in our city, not least when I approached him to provide training for our Labour party on anti-Semitism, and I was delighted that he accepted that. We have had positive feedback from the significant number of people who attended. I believe that again sets out best practice.

I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton South East (Mr McFadden) for highlighting, in his usual eloquent style, the real discourse about the political debate on identity, culture and faith. He is absolutely right that even one incident of antisemitism must be a cause of great concern. We have to know our history to know how crucial it is to be on top of the issue and to address it as a matter of urgency.

While I am still giving thanks, I pass on my thanks to the Jewish Leadership Council, which does outstanding work, especially on advancing good practice and taking forward so many initiatives across our country, particularly with its work on care for the elderly. We are reminded of the importance of that work today. It is so important that we have a real understanding of the diversity, identity, culture and innovations that come from all communities across the UK, and that we celebrate them in their own right, whether through our culture, our economy, our society or personally.

Many third-sector organisations, such as Jewish Care and Norwood, have made outstanding contributions to our country. I knew those organisations particularly well when I worked with them as a trade union official. Now, as a Member of Parliament, I work closely with the Holocaust Educational Trust as it leads the dialogue on remembering the past, addressing prejudice in society today and bringing the issue so close to home. It was a delight to hear from my hon. Friend the Member for Stretford and Urmston (Kate Green) about the incredible work that World Jewish Relief is doing with refugees. Again, that brings home the importance of the work across our communities, to welcome strangers and embrace all that they have to bring.

As a trade unionist—I refer hon. Members to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests—I have witnessed incredible contributions, not least from my hon. Friends, to advancing workers’ rights on behalf of the Jewish community. We are reminded of the important work contributed, across our trade union movement, towards anti-fascism. Like my hon. Friend the Member for City of Chester, I highlight the amazing work that the Community Security Trust does in an interfaith context to ensure the safety and security of residents, particularly in the Jewish community.

On Mitzvah Day, people across the country make a phenomenal contribution: some 40,000 people from the Jewish community come out to serve their community. In York, that has expressed itself in recent years through tree planting to alleviate flooding issues, but that is just one of 1,000 projects to meet local needs in communities. I thank people for opening up their hearts and their doors to our communities and reaching out. While I am speaking about opening doors, I should also say that I have very much enjoyed visiting my local Jewish community on a number of occasions to share Shabbat and share fellowship with my friends in it.

It is not just a question of charity. Our economy thrives because of all that the Jewish community has contributed over time. The hard work and innovation of many people within the Jewish community has broadened our economic footprint in the UK and beyond. I enjoyed hearing my hon. Friend the Member for City of Chester explain how fish and chips came to our country—I am sure that will feature in a future pub quiz. We also celebrate the Jewish community’s contribution to science, medicine, sport, literature and the arts in the UK. Whether they are Nobel prize winners or have simply made a contribution in their own right, we celebrate all who have participated in advancing our country.

As we mark the 75th anniversary of D-day, it is worth noting not only the 50,000 people from the Jewish community who served in our armed forces in the first world war, but the more than 60,000 who served in the second. We owe them a huge debt of gratitude.

I am thankful that many people from the Jewish community have served in this place. Our Labour party has been an important home to many from across the Jewish community over the years, with radical thinking about change and about how we want to shape and transform our society. We have supported the struggles that discrimination has brought and have stood in solidarity with those who face challenges. We are determined to rebuild that trust. It cannot be given; it must be demonstrated and earned.
At a time when we are seeing the rise of fascism across our nation, with people being othered because of their identity, culture or creed, it is vital that we unite and identify with shared values in order to ensure that all feel safe and welcome in our nation. Together, we must celebrate the contributions that come clearly from the values that lie at the heart of the Jewish community in both culture and faith.

3.52 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Rishi Sunak): As always, Sir David, it is a privilege and a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship. I thank the hon. Member for City of Chester (Christian Matheson) for securing this important debate and granting us the opportunity to reflect on the significant social, political, cultural and economic contributions that the Jewish community makes to our great United Kingdom. We must also pay thanks to the Jewish Leadership Council and Lord Levy for planting the seed of this debate.

I pay tribute to the hon. Gentleman for his first-rate opening speech. In a reasonably short time, he gave us an excellent overview of the full breadth and history of the Jewish community’s contribution to our country, and he should be commended for doing so with an incredibly positive and warm tone. I thank all other hon. Members who have participated in the debate; I will address the specific remarks made by the hon. Member for Stretford and Urmston (Kate Green) later in my speech.

I thank the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent North (Ruth Smeeth) for sharing her family story. I am glad that she did not take her grandmother’s advice, but has brought her ideas to this place. No one who has heard the hon. Lady speak on these issues, in this House or elsewhere, could fail to be struck by her force and passion. Our public discourse and debate in this place is the richer for her participation—and I am not sure that I will be able to look at tomatoes in the same way when I am at the supermarket this weekend.

I pay tribute to the right hon. Member for Wolverhampton South East (Mr McFadden) for his intelligent, thoughtful and powerful speech. He spoke not only with incredible bravery but with clarity and force—and without any notes, as far as I could tell. I look forward to re-reading his excellent speech.

Late in his life, the great writer and polemist Christopher Hitchens discovered that his mother was Jewish and that, by extension, so was he. When he told his oldest friend, Martin Amis, Amis replied, “You know, I find I’m jealous.” How else could he feel, when the Jewish people have one of the most enviable records of achievement of any demographic group in the United Kingdom’s history? Despite only ever forming a small percentage of the population, British Jews have shone in almost every field. They have inspired and entertained, created and innovated. They have become our doctors, our philosophers, our inventors, our musicians, our writers, our leaders, our role models, our parliamentarians and, indeed, one of our Prime Ministers.

It is only right that we celebrate the great achievements of the Jewish community, whose contributions have truly shaped our nation’s journey and identity. Before we do so, however, I must take note of the fact that a couple of hon. Members, including the right hon. Member for Wolverhampton South East, referred to ongoing incidents of prejudice, abuse and discrimination. It is deeply disappointing that that issue still arises in our society; it should be tackled unflinchingly where it occurs. Those who face such displays of bigotry should know that the British Government and everybody in this Chamber stand with them and support them.

I am always struck by the phenomenally strong community spirit that is shown by the Jewish community here in Britain. He will not thank me for saying it, and he did not insert it into my speech, but my private secretary, who is sitting a couple of rows behind me, is a shining example of that, as I discover whenever I glean what he has been up to in his weekend activity.

The community has social action at its heart. The very word for charity in Hebrew is derived from the word for justice. The biggest Jewish charity, Jewish Care, is one of the 100 largest charities in the UK. It provides care to more than 10,000 people a week and has 15 care homes, 13 community centres and four independent living communities. It is an inspiration to the rest of us, showing how much can be done within a community to support those in need.

Similarly, Norwood, which began in the 1700s as a hospital in the east end of London, has flourished and grown over the centuries to support people of all ages. This highlights just how generous the community is; its time and resources, with 500 volunteers and £12 million raised every year to maintain its amazing and precious programmes.

The community strives to look after the vulnerable—not only within it but in the wider world. The hon. Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell) gave the example of Mitzvah Day, when Jewish community groups and individuals up and down the country join forces with those of all faiths and none, volunteering their time to support those in need in their local community. That positive, collaborative social action is underpinned and inspired by the Jewish values of kindness, justice and shared responsibility. Last year, Mitzvah Day joined with Muslim Aid to launch a huge event to feed London’s homeless and vulnerable with that most famous of Jewish dishes—chicken soup.

The hon. Member for Stretford and Urmston spoke about the amazing work of World Jewish Relief, a charity founded by a small Jewish group in London in the 1930s. It now co-ordinates important relief efforts all over the world and helps people of all denominations; it has recently helped refugees in the Rohingya humanitarian crisis in Myanmar and cyclone victims in Mozambique. Of course, it would be remiss of me not to join other hon. Members in mentioning the invaluable role of the Community Security Trust, which seeks to ensure the safety and security of Jewish communities and other communities across the United Kingdom.

Finally, no summary of the Jewish contribution to British public life would be complete without mention of the Board of Deputies of British Jews, the national representative body of the UK’s Jewish community. As the longest-established religious minority in the UK, the Jewish people have led the way in demonstrating how to integrate fully and participate in our national life while retaining a distinct and proud identity, and that process has been led by the Board of Deputies. It has shown the way since 1760 in how to interact with the Government and fight for the rights of a group, while fostering good relations with those of other faiths and remaining perfectly integrated in wider society.
I will turn briefly from the community at large to the role of some individuals. It is no exaggeration at all to say that if I were merely to list every Jewish person who has achieved a record of note in UK society, we would be here for some weeks. However, I will give only a small sample, just a handful of those who have helped to shape our United Kingdom and what it is today. In the arts, I could mention Mike Leigh and Nicholas Hytner, Amy Winehouse and Yehudi Menuhin, Maureen Lipman and Sacha Baron Cohen; in academia, Simon Schama and Robert Winston; in the media, John Diamond and Jonathan Freedland; in art and design, Lucian Freud and Malcolm McLaren; Lord Neuberger, a President of the Supreme Court; Peter George Davis, the founder of the Special Boat Service; Jack Cohen, the founder of Tesco; and Ludwig Guttmann, the founder of the Paralympics.

I could mention many thousands of others who have founded the British businesses that we use every day and that provide employment for many, who have designed the technology that we use at work and at home, who have shaped the ideas that we follow, and who provide the entertainment we enjoy to rest and relax. I could speak for many hours, but in the interests of time we should press on.

I will end, therefore, by again thanking the hon. Member for City of Chester. He has done all of us a very valuable service. He has brought us together here today, to recognise, to celebrate and to be grateful for the invaluable contribution made by the Jewish community to the United Kingdom.

I stand here as someone who is the son of immigrants, and as someone who is proudly British, proudly Asian and proudly Hindu. I passionately believe that our society is richer for its diversity, and the Jewish community is a proud and shining testament to that.

4.2 pm

Christian Matheson: That was an excellent speech by the Minister, and I thank him for it. As he said, this debate has been characterised by speeches that have been at once passionate, extremely thoughtful and thought-provoking.

My hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent North (Ruth Smeeth) reminded us of her mum, who was indeed my boss and the boss of my hon. Friend the Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell). What the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent North did not tell us, of course, was that her mum started off in a fairly lowly position, as a secretary, and simply through hard work and strength of character she rose to become deputy general secretary of our trade union. Hard work and strength of character are often qualities that we associate very much with the Jewish community.

I am most grateful to all hon. Members who have taken part in this debate and helped to celebrate the contribution of the Jewish community. I have to say that perhaps Thursday afternoon is not the best time to get the maximum attendance for a debate, but any time is the best time to celebrate and give thanks for that contribution and, once again, I am most grateful to all hon. Members who have assisted in that today.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved.

That this House has considered the contribution of the Jewish Community to the UK.

4.3 pm

Sitting adjourned.
Written Statements
Tuesday 4 June 2019

BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL STRATEGY

Post Office Network

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Kelly Tolhurst): I wish to provide an update to hon. Members on the steps that the Government are taking to ensure the long-term sustainability and resilience of the post office network.

The Government set the strategic direction for Post Office Limited, to maintain a national network accessible to all and to do so on a sustainable financial basis and allow the company the commercial freedom to deliver this strategy as an independent business.

We recognise the Post Office’s distinct social purpose and the important role post offices play in communities across the country, which is why our 2017 manifesto committed to safeguard the network, protect existing rural services and work with the Post Office to extend the availability of business and banking services to families and small businesses in rural areas.

Between 1997 and 2010 the post office network reduced in size by 37%, resulting in the loss of over 7,000 post offices. Since 2010 we have invested over £2 billion in the network. This funding sought to increase the viability of the network by making it more accessible, modern and tailored to customers’ needs while reducing the long-term burden on the taxpayer.

The Government have no programme of post office closures. Post Office Limited has opened over 400 branches since April 2017 and the Government are committed to ensuring the long-term sustainability and resilience of the network. We not only place a contractual commitment on Post Office Limited to maintain a network of 11,500 branches, but also stipulate stringent access criteria to ensure that this large network is accessible to citizens across the country. More than 93% of the UK population live within one mile of their nearest branch, with more than 99% within three miles.

There are now over 11,500 branches and the post office network is at its most stable since 2013, having changed in size by under 1% over this period. This overall change accommodates a level of churn in what is an extremely diverse network, as branches close and are replaced, and Post Office Limited is therefore used to working quickly with local stakeholders to provide replacement services.

Government subsidy ensures that branches serving our rural communities that need additional support receive it so that they can stay open. In order to provide value for money the taxpayer the subsidy to the post office has reduced. This fact reflects the progress that the business has made: returning to profit after 16 years of losses, providing a stable network and reducing its reliance on the taxpayer.

Beyond 2021, Government remain committed to ensuring the long-term sustainability of the network and will work with Post Office Limited to achieve this.

It is crucial that running a post office is attractive and sustainable for postmasters, and they should be fairly remunerated for the services they provide. Post Office Limited’s successful renegotiation of the banking framework with 28 high street banks, announced on 15 April, secured a significant increase in the overall fees they receive from the banks. As a result of this, they will double and, in some case, treble the rate that agents receive for processing deposits from October 2019. For example, in a main post office branch, postmasters will receive £8.16 for processing a £8,000 cash deposit, compared with the £3.12 they currently receive.

98% of the post office network is franchised and postmasters are vital to the delivery of the network. The remuneration for delivering post office services should be combined with a successful retail offer in order for postmasters to thrive in today’s competitive retail environment.

The Government have rightly moved with the times as many of us now prefer to access services online. Whilst this has an impact on the Post Office, we cannot ignore people’s desire to transact with Government digitally from the convenience of their own homes. However, we are also committed to ensuring that its services are accessible to all citizens and the post office network does and will continue to play a key role in this.

We are committed to working with Post Office Limited and our postmasters to develop the business and offer, in order to maintain the delivery of services that our constituents want and need, so that the Post Office remains at the heart of communities across the country.

[HCWS1592]

EDUCATION

Independent Panel Report on Post-18 Education and Funding

The Secretary of State for Education (Damian Hinds): Today I will provide a statement to the House, announcing that the independent panel, chaired by Philip Augar, set up to provide input to the post-18 review of education and funding has now published its report. The report is available in full on gov.uk and was laid as a Command Paper last week.

[HCWS1589]

Student Finance: EEA and Swiss Nationals

The Minister for Universities, Science, Research and Innovation (Chris Skidmore): I am confirming that eligibility rules for students from the EEA and Switzerland, and their family members, who commence courses in England in the academic year starting in August 2020 will remain unchanged. EEA/Swiss nationals will remain eligible for home fee status, undergraduate, postgraduate and advanced learner financial support from Student Finance England for the duration of their course under the
current eligibility rules. This will provide certainty to providers and their prospective students from the EEA and Switzerland.

This announcement also applies to funding for apprenticeships, advanced learner loans and further education 19-plus.

EEA and Swiss students and staff make an important contribution to our universities and it is testament to our system that so many students from abroad choose to come and study here.

[HCWS1593]

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

Interim NHS People Plan

The Minister for Health (Stephen Hammond): Today I am depositing in the Libraries of both Houses a copy of the interim people plan, which sets out the steps the NHS will take to ensure the health system has the people, culture and leadership it needs to deliver the long term plan.

The interim people plan has been developed by Baroness Harding, the Chair of NHS Improvement, in partnership with front-line staff, NHS employers and representative organisations including trades unions and royal colleges.

The plan takes an unflinching look at the challenges facing people working across the NHS and, importantly, for the first time considers what action employers and NHS leaders need to take to make the NHS a great place to work. In future, careers in the NHS will better reflect the different lives, aspirations and expectations of those who choose to work in it.

In addition to the action the NHS will take to ensure the NHS is a great place to work, the interim people plan also sets out a number of practical steps the NHS will take now to increase the supply of clinical staff. A final people plan sets out a number of practical steps the NHS is a great place to work. In future, careers in the NHS will better reflect the different lives, aspirations and expectations of those who choose to work in it.

In addition to the action the NHS will take to ensure the NHS is a great place to work, the interim people plan also sets out a number of practical steps the NHS will take now to increase the supply of clinical staff. A consultation is planned exploring proposals to introduce greater pension flexibility, which are designed to address disincentives that may encourage senior clinicians to undertake less work and limit or reduce their workloads whilst participating in the NHS pension scheme. A final people plan will be published soon after the conclusion of the spending review.

[HCWS1587]

HOME DEPARTMENT

False and Authentic Documents Online System: Schengen Opt-out

The Minister for Immigration (Caroline Nokes): The Government have decided not to opt out of the draft regulation that establishes a new legislative basis for FADO and repeals joint action 98/700/JHA.

This is a continuing measure and the Government value the benefits of FADO. It is a very useful EU tool which helps us to validate identity and travel documents, primarily for border, immigration and wider law enforcement purposes. It is a database which contains detailed images of genuine travel and identity documents issued by EU member states and false documents encountered at the border and elsewhere.

We have always been a key contributor to the FADO database and the draft regulation will ensure the continuity and development of FADO. The FADO system itself will remain fundamentally unchanged.

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-out from EU legislation on a case-by-case basis, with a view to maximising the UK’s efforts to collaborate with EU on a security partnership once the UK leaves the EU.

[HCWS1588]

JUSTICE

Justice Devolution to Greater Manchester: Refreshed Memorandum of Understanding

The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice (Mr David Gauke): On 31 May the Under-Secretary of State for Justice, my hon. Friend the Member for Charnwood (Edward Argar), signed a refreshed memorandum of understanding (MoU) for justice devolution with Greater Manchester Combined Authority (GMCA).

This agreement replaces the current MoU, published in July 2016. It details the priority areas for the delivery of justice outcomes within GMCA. The commitments agreed between the Department (Ministry of Justice) and GMCA build on the previous agreement, recognise new challenges, and identify new opportunities for developing a broader, more integrated approach which improves outcomes and experiences for victims, witnesses, and offenders, as well as the communities and neighbourhoods in which they live.

The aim of the MoU is to increase local influence and improve partnership working to increase efficiencies and reduce reoffending. Delivery will take place within the context of the whole system approach to public services which is advocated by GMCA. The MoU fits with the Government’s priority to reduce reoffending and our 2017 manifesto commitment to further enhance the role of police and crime commissioners.

The areas covered in this refreshed MoU are youth justice, smarter justice, adult offender management and the victim’s journey. In summary:

Youth justice

With the aim of targeting resources where they can be most effective, the MoU focuses on adopting a preventive, problem-solving approach which puts the people in the right service at the right time. This includes establishing a local consortium to focus on resettlement from custody and prioritising specified cohorts in youth justice policy initiatives, including data sharing. The focus of this section aligns with the youth justice board (YJB) national standards which were published earlier this year.

Smarter justice

We will work towards greater family involvement to support compliance with regular judicial supervision. Along with GMCA we will develop inter-agency planning to increase confidence in community sentences and ensure pre-sentence reports identify vulnerable cohorts. There will also be work carried out to help identify where family-centred principles are best integrated at different points in the system.

Reforming adult offender management

We want to optimise the opportunities created through the new probation model to improve delivery within the context of Greater Manchester’s unified approach to
public services. This will include a programme of work to support increased viability of community disposals and to co-design approaches to delivery of probation services that support place-based integration. We will also explore co-commissioning options through the Greater Manchester reform investment fund.

The victim’s journey

We will work with GMCA as they seek to improve services for victims to provide a seamless service by using innovative approaches, including digital pathways, jointly evaluating the effectiveness of nationally commissioned services for victims, agreeing a programme to develop stronger links and ways of working at local level for the benefit of witnesses in GM and working to understand the impact of the criminal injuries compensation scheme on victims of terrorism.

This summary covers the main commitments of the MoU. It is available in full at https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/moj-gmca-memorandum-of-understanding-for-justice-devolution. Work will begin now to ensure we jointly deliver these commitments.

[HCWS1591]
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TREASURY

European Union Finances

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Elizabeth Truss):
I am today laying before Parliament the “European Union Finances 2018: statement on the 2018 EU Budget and measures to counter fraud and financial mismanagement” (CP 114). This is a routine annual publication and is the 38th in the series.

The statement gives details of revenue and expenditure in the 2018 European Union Budget, recent developments in EU financial management and measures to counter fraud against the EU Budget. It also includes a chapter and annex on the use of EU funds in the UK over the period.

This year, in light of the UK’s vote to leave the EU, the paper also contains an annex with the latest forecast (previously published in the OBR’s Economic and fiscal outlook in March 2019) of the UK’s financial settlement, as detailed in the withdrawal agreement. Since this forecast, the Government have agreed an extension of Article 50. This extension will affect the size of the financial settlement as the UK will make contributions to the EU as a member state, which would have fallen due under the implementation period. The net effect on EU contributions is zero.

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH OFFICE

Human Rights and Democracy Report 2018


The report analyses human rights developments overseas in 2018 and illustrates how the Government worked to promote and defend human rights globally.

The report assesses the situation in 30 countries, which the FCO has designated as its human rights priority countries. These are Afghanistan, Bahrain, Bangladesh, Burma, Burundi, Central African Republic, China, Colombia, Democratic People’s Republic of Korea, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Egypt, Eritrea, Iran, Iraq, Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories, Libya, Maldives, Pakistan, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Somalia, South Sudan, Sri Lanka, Sudan, Syria, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Venezuela, Yemen and Zimbabwe.

2018 marked the 70th anniversary of the universal declaration of human rights, and the 20th anniversary of the UN declaration on human rights defenders. The report demonstrates the principles and values enshrined in these declarations. It sets out the UK’s actions to promote human rights and democracy in a wide range of areas, including through partnerships with human rights defenders, our leadership on promoting media freedom and gender equality, our work to eradicate modern slavery, and our commitment to deliver change for those who are abused, targeted or killed for their beliefs.
The Government are committed to addressing the underlying cause of the recruitment and retention problems. However, it would not be sensible to make pension changes when the McCloud litigation, which could have a significant but uncertain impact on public service pensions, is ongoing. Once that litigation has concluded, the Government will bring forward legislation for a long-term, pensions-based solution for the whole judiciary.

However, there is now a need for immediate action, which is why today I am announcing the introduction of a temporary recruitment and retention allowance at 25% for salaried High Court judges, and 15% for circuit and upper tribunal judges covered by the new pension scheme.

This measure will affect only about a quarter of the salaried judiciary and aims to resolve the immediate recruitment issue until a long-term, sustainable, pension-based solution can be implemented for all judges.

It replaces the existing allowance of 11% for High Court judges, and is lower than the SSRB's recommendation of a 32% permanent salary increase for High Court judges and a 22% increase for circuit and upper tribunal judges covered by the new pension scheme, striking a balance between an appropriate investment of public funds and addressing serious recruitment and retention problems.

We recognise that the SSRB also pointed to emerging recruitment issues at the district bench and, while the evidence of a problem is not currently strong enough to necessitate immediate action at this tier of the judiciary, we are committed to addressing the underlying cause of the recruitment and retention problems highlighted by the SSRB through a long-term solution for the whole judiciary, which will include pension scheme changes.

The Government will also be making an annual pay award for 2019-20 of 2% for all judges, which will be backdated to 1 April 2019. In addition, we will ensure that judges are placed in the correct salary groupings based on the evidence provided by the SSRB and their independent job comparison panel. Salary group changes will come into effect at the start of the legal year, 1 October 2019.

Similarly the Government will consult on measures designed to address pension tax disincentives that may encourage senior clinicians to limit or reduce their workloads while participating in the NHS pension scheme.

In addition, the Government fully endorse the work that the Lord Chief Justice and Senior President of Tribunals are leading to strengthen leadership and support career development in a modern and professional judiciary.

This includes taking practical steps by encouraging and supporting eligible candidates from under-represented groups successfully to apply for judicial office; supporting career progression for existing judges; growing leadership capability within the judiciary by implementing appraisals and career discussions; developing new training for leadership judges; and giving leadership judges the data and tools they need to drive performance in the system.

This Government are committed to delivering world-class public services and taking action when the evidence requires it to ensure their continued delivery. That is why today I am announcing a package of measures which strikes the right balance between the importance of ensuring we can recruit and retain world-class judges for the future and the necessary investment of public funds.
A copy of the Government response to the SSRB’s major review has been laid in both Houses and will be available online at www.gov.uk.

[HCWS1597]

Justice and Home Affairs Council

The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice (Mr David Gauke): The EU Justice and Home Affairs Council of Ministers will meet on 6–7 June in Luxembourg. I will represent the UK for justice day. Sir Tim Barrow, Permanent Representative of the UK to the EU and Chris Jones, Director of the Europe Directorate at the Home Office, will represent the UK for interior day.

Justice day on 6 June will begin with a progress report on the proposal on the third-party effects of assignment of claims, which is currently being negotiated in Council working groups. The UK has opted out of this proposal but continues to input to ensure that the legislation does not create any unintended disruption to current financial market practice.

There will then be a policy debate about the use of IT in the proposals to amend the service and taking of evidence regulations. Member states have been divided on the extent to which the processes in each should be digitised. Subject to further considerations about costs, Ministers will be asked whether a mandatory IT system should be introduced and, if so, whether it should be a centralised system or one that is decentralised and based on the existing systems in each member state, and what preferences they have for the type of software that should be used. The UK opted in to the proposal on the service regulation but not the proposal on the taking of evidence regulation.

The Council will then discuss non-legislative activities. First, there will be a policy debate on the future of EU substantive criminal law, which follows a survey of member states seeking views on the use of substantive law in future EU proposals. Given that it looks to future legislative activity, after UK exit, the UK does not seek to direct the conclusions so I will not intervene.

During the working lunch, I will discuss with other Ministers the use of judicial training to foster mutual trust and exchange views on ways to enhance the understanding, confidence and co-operation between judges and prosecutors within EU member states.

After lunch there will be a policy debate on the way forward in the field of mutual recognition in criminal matters. The aim of this debate is to identify matters which may help or hinder more effective mutual recognition, looking in particular at lessons that may be learned from recent CJEU case law and views put forward by member states. In so far as this looks to future legislative activity, the UK does not seek to direct this project since it would be realised after UK exit. The UK is, however, supportive of this work since we aim to be a co-operative partner following UK exit, and as a member state, have experience to offer to the project. I will therefore indicate that the UK will provide its general support and offer assistance.

The presidency will then put Council conclusions which encourage Eurojust and the networks established in the area of judicial co-operation in criminal matters to further develop the co-ordination and synergies between them to Ministers for adoption. The UK supports the work of Eurojust, and agrees that better co-ordination between networks hosted by Eurojust would be helpful for criminal justice co-operation.

The Commission will provide an update on the planned preparatory steps to make the European Public Prosecutor’s Office (EPPO) operational by the end of 2020. The UK has not opted into EPPO.

The presidency will put the Council decisions relating to the opening of negotiations for EU-US agreement on cross-border access to e-evidence, and authorising the participation in the negotiations on a second additional protocol to the Budapest convention, to ministers for adoption. Whilst the UK supports the overall aim of enhanced international co-operation on e-evidence and its use in preventing and tackling harms to public security, it has not opted into these Council decisions.

Finally, Ministers will adopt the retention of data for the purpose of fighting crime. The agenda item relates to efforts to overcome the challenges of ECJ judgments relating to communications data regimes. The UK supports comprehensively exploring options for lawful regimes in member states, although shares some concerns to an EU-wide legislative solution. The UK has not opted into the relevant measure(s) but this is of interest in the ongoing UK-US CLOUD Act negotiations.

Lithuania will then provide information on actions against judges and prosecutors. Lithuania is seeking co-operation against any possible Interpol alerts launched by Russia to locate or arrest Lithuanian officials involved in a Lithuanian court against former Soviet military officials found guilty of war crimes and crimes against humanity committed in 1991. I will highlight that the UK considers very seriously any misuse of INTERPOL notices and is committed to ensuring that international norms and codes are upheld.

Interior day will take place on Friday 7 June. Sir Tim Barrow, Permanent Representative of the UK to the EU and Chris Jones, Director of the Europe Directorate at the Home Office, will represent the UK for interior day.

The Council will hold a policy debate on the future of EU law enforcement, and in particular the need for an integrated approach to policing, interagency co-operation and further development of EU policing solutions. The UK supports the concept of an integrated approach to security, accompanied by the development of EU policing solutions which respond to changing threat landscapes and evolving technologies.

The EU counter-terrorism co-ordinator will then present on the implications of 5G for law enforcement work. The UK supports discussion at EU-level on this issue, and further thinking on the nature and extent of the challenges posed by this emerging technology.

The Council will then receive an update on co-operation between competent authorities dealing with counter-terrorism. The presidency will update on work being undertaken to explore practical ways on how to co-operate. The UK supports such co-operation where this adds value over existing exchanges between law enforcement authorities and Europol.

Over lunch, Ministers will undertake an exchange of views with representatives of the UNHCR and the IOM on the challenges ahead on migration and asylum. Following the rise in migrant arrivals across the central
Mediterranean, the discussion will return to seeking sustainable solutions on disembarkation and strengthening the response upstream. The UK intervention will focus on our extensive support upstream which ranges from tackling organised immigration crime and the use of strategic communications to building partnerships and capability with source and transit countries to jointly address the drivers of migration.

The presidency will seek to reach a general approach on the draft directive on common standards and procedures in member states for returning illegally staying third-country nationals (recast), with the exception of article 22 on the border procedure and the related recitals. The UK has not opted into this measure and will not intervene.

The presidency will also seek partial general approaches on draft regulations establishing the integrated border management fund, establishing the asylum and migration fund, and establishing the internal security fund. These are subject to wider negotiations on the overall multi-annual financial framework. The UK will not participate in any of these funds, and will not intervene.

[HCWS1600]

PRIME MINISTER

Grenfell Tower Inquiry: Panel Members

The Prime Minister (Mrs Theresa May): The fire in Grenfell Tower on 14 June 2017 was an unimaginable tragedy that should never have happened. The Government set up the Grenfell Tower Inquiry to get to the truth about what happened, deliver justice for victims, survivors, bereaved families and the wider community, and to ensure that such a terrible tragedy could never happen again.

Section 7(1)(b) of the Inquiries Act 2005 allows me to appoint panel members to the inquiry panel at any time during the inquiry. I have recently announced that Professor Nabeel Hamdi and Thouria Istephan will be appointed to the inquiry panel for phase 2 of the inquiry’s work.

Professor Nabeel Hamdi is a widely accomplished academic with an international reputation in housing and participatory design and planning. Thouria Istephan is an experienced and highly respected architect with a professional focus on health and safety. She is a partner at Foster + Partners and has a range of skills and experience directly relevant to the issues that the inquiry will be investigating in phase 2 of its work.

Given the extent of the tragic circumstances surrounding the fire, we should not be surprised by the scale and breadth of issues to be investigated that have emerged from the inquiry’s work. Phase 2 of the inquiry will be the largest phase in terms of the number and range of issues to be considered and I am confident that these appointments will ensure that the inquiry panel has the diversity of skills and expertise necessary for the scope and complexity of issues to be addressed by phase 2 of the inquiry’s work.

I wrote to the Chair of the inquiry, Sir Martin Moore-Bick, before recess informing him of my decision and to seek his consent to the appointments in accordance with section 7(2)(b) of the Inquiries Act 2005. Sir Martin replied on 29 May 2019 consenting to the appointment. Our exchange of letters can be found on gov.uk: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/names-of-grenfell-tower-inquiry-panel-members-announced-30-may-2019 [HCWS1595]

TRANSPORT

Transport Council

The Secretary of State for Transport (Chris Grayling): The Transport Council will be taking place in Luxembourg on Thursday 6 June. This will be the only Transport Council under the Romanian presidency (the presidency). The Council is expected to reach a general approach on a proposal from the third tranche of the “mobility package” for the electronic communication of freight transport information. The proposal would oblige member state authorities to accept electronic freight documents related to the transport of goods. The Government consider that the proposal includes some positive changes to modernise the processes and, as currently drafted, will provide an acceptable balance between EU-wide action and national discretion.

Next, there will be a progress report on a proposal from the third tranche of the “mobility package” for the regulation on streamlining measures for the realisation of the trans-European transport network (TEN-T). The proposal aims to provide a streamlined approval process for transport infrastructure projects on the TEN-T, speeding up their implementation.

Following this, the Council will give a progress report on a proposal from the first tranche of the “mobility package” to revise the current directive on the use of hired vehicles which aims to regulate under which circumstances member states could limit goods vehicles registered overseas from being hired by their hauliers.

Afterwards, there will be a progress report on the proposal from the first tranche of the “mobility package” to revise the current directive on Eurovignette (road charging). This will provide an update on negotiations on proposals to amend the current directive on charging of heavy goods vehicles. Our view, that national Governments should have the flexibility to do what is right in their circumstances, is shared by many other member states.

Next, the presidency has prepared a progress report on negotiations on proposals to revise the regulation on rail passengers’ rights and obligations, aimed at strengthening the rights of rail passengers, including by improving access for people with disabilities or reduced mobility.

Under any other business, the presidency will provide information on other current legislative proposals. Additionally, it will give an update on “Clean planet for all”, the European strategic long-term vision for a prosperous, modern, competitive and climate neutral economy. The Luxembourg delegation will present information on tackling greenhouse gas emissions and congestion by aviation pricing. The Commission will supply information on three items: airspace capacity;
connectivity-related outcomes of the EU-China summit that took place in Brussels on 9 April 2019; and a study on transport externalities. The Polish delegation will supply information on the conference on “Benefits for regions resulting from the implementation of the route Via Carpatia” that took place in Lancut on 17 April 2019. Finally, the Finnish delegation will provide information on the work programme of their forthcoming presidency of the Council of the European Union.

Over lunch, EU Ministers will be asked to endorse a joint declaration on transport co-operation between the EU and the six eastern partner countries of Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine. The joint declaration aims to take stock of the main achievements in the transport relations between the EU and the eastern partner countries over the years and it is not legally binding.

[HCWS1594]
The Minister for Digital and the Creative Industries (Margot James): The telecommunications formation of the Transport, Telecommunications and Energy Council will take place in Luxembourg on 7 June 2019. The Deputy Permanent Representative to the EU, Katrina Williams, will represent the UK.

The Council will begin with the adoption of A-points, including on the recast public sector information directive. The Council will then consider a progress report on the e-privacy regulation. Following this, the Council will adopt a decision on the position to be taken by EU member states on behalf of the European Union in the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) world radiocommunication conference 2019 (WRC-19). After this, the Council will hold a policy debate and adopt conclusions on the future of a highly digitised Europe beyond 2020: “Boosting digital and economic competitiveness across the Union and digital cohesion”.

The Romanian presidency will then provide information on the recast public sector information directive: the digital Europe programme in the next multi-annual financial framework from 2021-27; and the proposed regulation establishing the European cybersecurity competence centre and the network of co-ordination centres.

The Romanian presidency will then provide an overview of presidency events in Romania. The incoming Finnish presidency will then provide information on its work plan.

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH OFFICE

Foreign Affairs Council

The Minister for Europe and the Americas (Sir Alan Duncan): The High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy (HRVP), Federica Mogherini, chaired the Foreign Affairs Council (FAC) and an eastern partnership Ministerial on 13 May. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs attended the eastern partnership Ministerial. The meetings were held in Brussels. Eastern partnership Ministerial meeting and lunch

Foreign ministers highlighted the importance of the eastern partnership on its 10th anniversary and took stock of the commitments made at the last summit in November 2017. They discussed the implementation of the 20 deliverables for 2020 programme, which was adopted at that summit. They also reflected on future co-operation and discussed political priorities for the coming period.

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DIGITAL, CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Telecommunications Council

The High Representative and Foreign Ministers had an exchange of views on a number of pressing issues. On Iran, they recalled their full commitment to the preservation and full implementation of the JCPOA and expressed concern at recent declarations by Iran. Ministers also expressed regret at the re-imposition of sanctions by the US and underlined their commitment to achieving full operationalisation of the special purpose vehicle, INSTEX.

Ministers touched on the situation in Venezuela. The High Representative debriefed Ministers on the most recent international contact group (ICG) meeting on 5-6 May. Ministers reiterated their support for the ICG and its work.

Foreign Ministers noted the positive signals from the incoming Ukrainian administration, in particular its intention to continue and strengthen the reform implementation process. Ministers expressed concern at the Russian decree simplifying the issuing of passports in certain areas of Ukraine’s Donetsk and Luhansk regions.

The High Representative also referred to the situation in Sudan and to the US decision to discontinue the waiver on title 3 of the Helms-Burton Act.

Libya

UNSG Special Representative for Libya Ghassan Salamé joined Ministers for an exchange of views on possible next steps to avoid further escalation in the conflict.

Sahel

Foreign Ministers discussed the political framework and prepared for the exchange of views between EU Foreign and Defence Ministers on 14 May and with the Foreign and Defence Ministers of the G5 Sahel countries (Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania and Niger).

Council conclusions

The Council agreed a number of measures without discussion:

The Council adopted conclusions on the Sahel.

The Council adopted a statement on Libya.

The Council adopted the EU annual report on human rights and democracy in the world for 2018.

The Council adopted conclusions on EU relations with Latin America and the Caribbean, following the joint communication by the High Representative and the Commission on the “EU, Latin America and the Caribbean: Partnering for prosperity, democracy, resilience and global governance” of 17 April 2019.

The Council transposed into EU law an update issued by the UN on 19 April 2019 related to a person designated under the Central African Republic sanctions regime.

The Council adopted the EU’s common position with a view to the EU-Tunisia Association Council, which took place on Friday 17 May.

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

Historic Patient Safety Incidents: Liverpool Community Health NHS Trust

The Minister for Health (Stephen Hammond): The report of an independent review conducted by Dr Bill Kirkup into the widespread failings by Liverpool Community Health Trust was published on 8 February 2018. The report described how over-ambitious cost
improvement programmes as part of a bid for foundation 
trust status placed patient safety at risk, leading to 
serious lapses in care and widespread harm to patients. 
A culture of bullying meant that staff were afraid to 
speak up and safety incidents were ignored or went 
unrecognised.

Today, I am informing the House that NHS England 
and NHS Improvement will establish an independent 
investigation of previous serious incidents at Liverpool 
Community Health. This second review will again be 
led by Dr Bill Kirkup supported by an independent 
expert oversight panel and will be conducted over three 
stages. Stages 1 and 2 will identify individual serious 
patient safety incidents that had not been reported or 
adequately investigated by Liverpool Community Health 
and undertake a series of historic, mortality reviews. 
Stage 3 will fully investigate those individual serious 
patient safety incidents identified from the previous 
stages to determine the scale of deaths and patient 
harm and identify local and national learning.

The independent investigation will also advise regulators 
where, in the opinion of the panel, the systems, processes 
and senior leadership within the former Liverpool Health 
Community Trust may have adversely contributed to 
the safe delivery of patient care. It will identify any 
themes, trends or issues that may require further 
investigation.

This will not be a re-run of the previous independent 
review, but it will draw upon its findings as well as the 
ew evidence identified by Mersey Care NHS Foundation 
Trust in its response to the recommendations of the 
original report. The independent investigation will engage 
with families of former patients and affected staff to 
understand their concerns to inform the work of Stage 3.

Local stakeholders will be briefed and the investigation 
will publish its terms of reference once these have been 
finalised with the Chair.

NHS England and NHS Improvement expect work 
on Stages 1 and 2 will commence immediately and the 
independent investigation will report towards the end 
of 2020.

I am confident that Dr Bill Kirkup will oversee a 
thorough and independent investigation of these 
outstanding issues and deliver his recommendations 
swiftly.

Today we are publishing a consultation seeking views 
on our proposals for a new system of building and fire 
safety which puts residents’ safety at its heart.

Soon after the fire at Grenfell Tower, we commissioned 
the independent review of building regulations and fire 
safety, led by Dame Judith Hackitt. Dame Judith concluded 
that the current system for ensuring fire safety in high-rise 
buildings was “not fit for purpose” and had lost public 
confidence and residents’ trust. We accepted Dame 
Judith’s diagnosis of the system and in December 2018, 
we published our implementation plan that committed to 
take forward the review’s recommendations as part of 
a fundamental reform of the system for “higher-risk 
residential buildings”.

The consultation we are publishing today, titled “Building 
a safer future: proposals for reform of the building 
safety regulatory system—a consultation”, outlines how 
we propose to take forward meaningful legislative reform 
and is seeking views on five areas of the new regime.

The first is the scope of the new regime. We propose 
the new regime applies, from the beginning, to all new 
and existing multi-occupied residential buildings of 
18 metres or more, broadly in line with the ban on 
combustible materials which we brought into force last 
year. We propose that the system has flexibility to 
include other building types over time, based on evidence 
of risk and further research.

Secondly, we are proposing a comprehensive duty holder 
regime which means that at each stage of a building’s 
life—through design, construction and occupation, 
including those buildings already occupied—there will 
be clearly identified people who are directly accountable 
for the safety of residential buildings 18 metres or more. 
The duty holder regime will mean that for the first time 
there will be clear accountability on who owns building 
risks and clear responsibilities for managing the risks to 
sure buildings are safe for residents. These responsibilities, 
which include creating and maintaining the digital records 
of a building and producing a safety case that will be 
approved by the new building safety regulator prior to 
issuing a building safety certificate, will be set out in 
law.

Thirdly, we are seeking views on giving residents a 
stronger voice in the new regime and ensuring their 
concerns are heard and acted on. We propose that 
residents should receive better information on their 
buildings so that they can participate in decisions about 
safety, as well as providing clear and quick routes of 
escalation for their concerns if things go wrong.

Fourthly, we have outlined plans for a new building 
safety regulator to provide oversight of the new building 
safety regulatory regime. This regulator will also oversee 
the wider building and regulatory system, incorporating 
and improving on the functions currently undertaken 
by the Building Regulations Advisory Committee (BRAC). 
We are also proposing to strengthen the oversight and 
regulation of construction products.

Finally, the system proposed will be underpinned by 
strengthened enforcement and sanctions to deter non-
compliance with the new regime. We believe that this 
will help to drive real culture change across the industry.

Alongside this consultation, we are also publishing:
A “quick read” version of the consultation document to 
ensure that the content is accessible to everyone.

The summary of responses to our call for evidence on 
engagement with residents.

The report from the industry-led competence steering group 
setting out their proposals for oversight of competence.
The Government are also launching a call for evidence on the Regulatory Reform (Fire Safety) Order 2005. We want to ensure that the Order is fit for purpose for all buildings it regulates. The call for evidence is the first step to updating the evidence base on the effectiveness of the Order, since this gives an opportunity for fire safety professionals and businesses or individuals regulated by the Fire Safety Order to share their views and experience on how the Order works in practice.

But we have not waited for legislation to make change. While successful, fundamental, real-world change on this scale, and across a complex market and regulatory landscape, will take time, we are acting now to reform the system. We have:

- identified over 400 high-rise buildings with unsafe Aluminium Composite Material (ACM) cladding, like the type used on Grenfell Tower, working with local authorities and fire and rescue authorities, ensuring that there are appropriate interim safety measures in place;
- made £600 million funding available for the replacement of unsafe ACM cladding on high-rise residential homes in the social and private sectors;
- made expert advice available to building owners on a range of other safety risks and taken action to remove unsafe products from the market;
- laid regulations and guidance to ban the use of combustible materials during building work on the external walls of new buildings of 18 metres or more in height and containing blocks of flats, hospitals, residential care premises, dormitories in boarding schools and student accommodation;
- consulted on a clarified version of the building regulations' fire safety guidance (approved document B) and issued a call for evidence as the first step in a full technical review of the guidance. We are currently reviewing responses and will publish the clarified statutory guidance and response to the call for evidence in the summer; and
- launched the social landlords resident engagement best practice group, to develop and share ways to better engage residents in keeping their buildings safe.

We have also established a joint regulators group to help us develop and pilot new approaches. Some of the proposals set out in the consultation are being tested and piloted voluntarily by construction firms and housing associations who have joined our Early Adopters work. Today also sees the launch of the Early Adopters’ Building Safety Charter. I welcome their leadership in this area and encourage others to follow them.

Our reforms are being developed to complement other important changes we are making elsewhere, such as those outlined in our Green Paper on social housing — “A new deal for social housing”— and reforms in the leasehold and private rented sectors.

The consultation opens today for eight weeks until 31 July. We will continue engaging with residents, industry and the wider sector as we develop these proposals further. The documents are published at: https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/building-a-safer-future-proposals-for-reform-of-the-building-safety-regulatory-system

The publication of the consultation I have announced today is essential for restoring trust in the building safety system and making sure that residents are safe now, and in the future.

[HCWS1605]
Birmingham to Leeds via the east midlands, and from Crewe to Manchester. These include the first proposals for infrastructure to one day allow Northern Powerhouse Rail (NPR) trains to use the HS2 route and vice versa.

HS2 is making progress and work on phase 1 (from London to the west midlands) is well under way. Around 9,000 jobs are now supported by the delivery of HS2, with 300 apprentices on board and 2,000 businesses working on building the new backbone of Britain’s rail network.

HS2 phase 2b will complete the full “Y network” and deliver the full benefits of HS2 in terms of capacity and better connections between cities and towns. Phase 2b will be a catalyst for regeneration and economic growth across the north and midlands. In July 2017, I confirmed the route from Crewe to Manchester and Birmingham to Leeds via the east midlands. In November 2018, I consulted on working drafts of the environmental statement and equalities impact assessment for phase 2b, a major milestone in preparing the hybrid Bill. I am today publishing a summary of the responses to those consultations, which are informing HS2 Limited’s ongoing design work.

The proposals I am putting forward today mark another major milestone for HS2 phase 2b and follow extensive work to ensure that the route offers the best value for taxpayers’ money as well as minimising disruption for residents and impacts on the environment.

This consultation includes proposals to allow for two future junctions that could see the HS2 line into Manchester used as part of NPR. These proposals have been developed in partnership with Transport for the North, and, in the future, would open up the opportunity for a potential new route between Manchester and Liverpool that could also be used for services between London and Liverpool.

Design work on the scheme continues and where further change is needed we will consult again ahead of Bill deposit. Further scope to support the interfaces with NPR (including at Leeds) and Midlands Connect is currently being considered and is subject to future funding decisions. This consultation also considers some works on the existing rail network that will allow for HS2 trains to run between the south and our great northern cities.

It is an opportunity for communities affected by all the proposed changes to have their say in how the scheme develops. Good quality community engagement is crucial to HS2 and we want the input of those who will be affected.

In addition to today’s consultation, I am also publishing updated safeguarding directions for the phase 2b route to reflect the project’s updated land requirements. I am also extending the rural property support zones for phase 2b in certain areas, this brings a greater number of property owners in scope of these compensation schemes, or a higher value payment, enabling more people to benefit.

Copies of the Command Paper and safeguarding directions will be placed in the Libraries of both Houses.

[HCWS1603]
Low-Carbon Generation: Smart Export Guarantee

The Minister for Universities, Science, Research and Innovation (Chris Skidmore): I am pleased to announce I will be laying legislation today to introduce a new supplier-led subsidy free Smart Export Guarantee (SEG). This will ensure that homes and businesses, who export their surplus low carbon electricity to the grid, will be able to receive payment from their energy suppliers. The SEG will come into force in Great Britain from the end of December this year.

The UK has made substantial progress in building a successful renewables industry as part of our move to a low carbon economy. In 2017, businesses active in the low carbon and renewable energy economy generated £44.5 billion in turnover and employed an estimated 209,500 full-time equivalent employees. Our Modern Industrial Strategy sets out how the Government will ensure that the UK continues to benefit from the transition to a low carbon economy.

Developments in technology and the industry, supported by the Government, have driven down the cost of small-scale low carbon electricity generation to a position where some projects can now be built without subsidy. This is in line with our vision that electricity generation should be competitive, and market based.

However, from responses in our call for evidence in July last year, it was clear small-scale generators can struggle to access the electricity market, while some larger suppliers are unfamiliar with smaller players in the sector. Responses suggested that following the closure of the Feed in Tariffs Scheme (FiTs), some form of Government intervention remains necessary while markets for small-scale low carbon generation are still emerging.

The SEG will address this by requiring licensed electricity suppliers to offer a tariff for electricity exported by small scale low carbon generators, such as households with solar panels. This means small scale generators will be able to fully participate in the UK electricity market. This new requirement will apply to suppliers with more than 150,000 domestic customers. Other smaller suppliers can also voluntarily participate in the SEG.

Other than a few core conditions, such as payments having to always be greater than zero, this policy is market-led. The rates paid to the small power producers will be determined by the market rather than set by Government. This is unlike the FiTs, which was funded through levies on consumers’ energy bills.

The SEG will complement the deployment of smart, flexible technologies such as storage and demand-side response. A smart and flexible system could save £17-40 billion across the electricity system to 2050. The policy will encourage electricity to be sold at the times when it is most needed and market prices are highest.

Previously, the amount of electricity exported by small scale generators has often been unmeasured and flowed to the grid without metering. The rollout of smart meters allows a more precise approach, which in turn will make it easier to manage the electricity system as the number of small scale generators, as well as electric vehicles and small-scale storage batteries, increases.

Suppliers will also be free to choose the form of the tariff they offer and be encouraged to try different approaches, provided they meet the SEG requirements. This will allow simple tariff offers to be implemented quickly, with an expectation that increasingly smart approaches will be implemented.

The deadline for compliance will be from the end of the year to provide enough time for suppliers to make necessary system changes to operate the SEG. This will not preclude suppliers from offering export tariffs in advance of the deadline, as some are already doing.

To ensure that the market is delivering meaningful and innovative tariffs, Ofgem will report annually on the provisions made by suppliers for small-scale exporters. This will include the range, nature and uptake of SEG tariffs. If we consider that insufficient progress is being made, we will consult on reviewing the operation of SEG.

The SEG will ensure that small-scale low carbon generators are reimbursed for the electricity they export to the grid and can act as a springboard to the development of a robust and competitive market solutions. SEG allows the private sector to innovate and invest, while small-scale generation technologies can compete on their own merits. We expect that the electricity market will grow smarter and more flexible, and consumers will be offered an increasing range of innovative smart products and services. These services will support the integration and optimisation of onsite low carbon generation.

I will place in the Libraries of both Houses, copies of the “Government response to the consultation on proposals for the future development of small-scale low-carbon electricity generation” which sets out further information on the SEG.

1 Final results from the Low Carbon and Renewable Energy Survey on the low carbon and renewable energy economy in the UK, including direct and indirect activity, employees and turnover, available at:
https://www.ons.gov.uk/economy/environmentalaccounts/bulletins/finalestimates/2017

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH OFFICE

Great Britain China Centre: Tailored Review

The Minister for Asia and the Pacific (Mark Field): I am announcing today the publication of the recent tailored review of the Great Britain China Centre (GBCC), an arm’s-length body of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO).
The GBCC was established in 1974 and focuses on strengthening the UK-China relationship by “building trust and supporting dialogues between Government, judiciary and policy makers on key rule of law and reform issues”. Since 1974, it has played an important part in delivering UK expertise on democracy and democratic institutions.

The principal aims of tailored reviews are to ensure public bodies remain fit for purpose, are well governed and properly accountable for what they do.

In conducting this tailored review, officials engaged with stakeholders in the UK and overseas, including across UK Government, civil society, as well as with GBCC’s board, staff and management.

The review concluded in April 2019.

The review found that “GBCC continues to perform an important function in the UK-China relationship; makes a positive contribution to UK priorities in China; and represents good value for money for the taxpayer”. The review also contains a number of recommendations to strengthen GBCC’s governance and its relationship with the FCO.

Copies of the review will be placed in the Libraries of both Houses.

[HCWS1607]

HOME DEPARTMENT

Immigration: DNA Evidence

The Minister for Immigration (Caroline Nokes): Today I am announcing the publication of the Home Office response to Darra Singh’s review of the Home Office response to the mandating of DNA for immigration purposes. The Home Secretary commissioned this review to provide independent oversight of the effectiveness of remedial action taken by the Department when the incorrect mandating of DNA evidence came to light last year.

The review recognises the considerable efforts made by the Department, once the issue came to light, to assess the scale of the problem and prevent its recurrence, and to identify those affected and take remedial action, including reimbursing DNA testing costs where appropriate. The review acknowledges that good progress has been made to update guidance on DNA and to provide training on this issue.

While the review acknowledges the hard work behind the immediate response, it comments that the effective direction provided by the critical incident process could have been put in place at an earlier stage. The review also identifies areas where the Home Office’s approach to sampling, data collection, and assurance in this instance could have been improved.

The Department accepts the recommendations made in the report and has already taken action on them. Furthermore, beyond this specific issue the Department is focused on meeting the individual needs of the public we serve by improving customer service, ensuring we better protect the vulnerable and focusing on becoming more of a listening organisation.

I will arrange for copies of the report and Home Office response to be placed in the Libraries of both Houses.

The Home Secretary and I would like to thank Darra Singh for his considerable effort in producing the report and its recommendations.

[HCWS1610]

WORK AND PENSIONS

Employment, Social Policy, Health and Consumer Affairs Council

The Minister for Employment (Alok Sharma): The Employment, Social Policy, Health and Consumer Affairs Council will take place on 13th June 2019 in Luxembourg. Kelly Tolhurst, Parliamentary Under-Secretary for the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, will represent the UK.

The Council will be provided with a progress report on the directive on equal treatment. Conclusions will be presented to the Council for adoption on: Closing the gender pay gap; implications for the safety and health of workers in the changing world of work; and the EU Council Auditors’ report on the Fund for European Aid to the Most Deprived (FEAD).

Under the agenda item on the European semester agenda item there will be a high level policy debate on the employment and social policy aspects of country specific recommendations.

Under other business, the presidency will give updates on current legislative proposals: a regulation on European social statistics and revision of the regulations on the co-ordination of social security systems. Information will also be provided on presidency conferences, gender balance on company boards and the work programme of the incoming Finnish presidency. The Maltese delegation will provide additional information on the outcome of the EU-Arab high-level meeting on disability rights and prioritising gender budgeting in the future multiannual financial framework.

In the margins of the meeting, representatives of the Government of each member state will make a decision on which member state will host the European Labour Authority.

[HCWS1608]
BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL STRATEGY

Smart Data: Consultation

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Kelly Tolhurst): Today I will be placing a copy of a consultation document entitled: “Smart Data: Putting consumers in control of their data and enabling innovation” in the Libraries of both Houses. This outlines the conclusions of the Smart Data Review that was announced in the Modernising Consumer Markets Green Paper and consults on future action by the Government.

The consultation sets out our vision for an economy where consumers’ data works for them and not against them. Data needs to be smart: easily and instantly accessible to consumers and be able to be safely and securely transferred to third party services who can use this data to provide innovative services for consumers. This is what we mean by smart data.

The consultation focuses on introducing new smart data initiatives to improve consumer outcomes and promote innovation in regulated markets. The key proposals we are consulting on include:

- Accelerating the development of innovative data-driven services through the establishment of a new cross-sectoral smart data function to support, manage and govern the delivery of smart data initiatives
- Introducing an open communications initiative in the telecoms market to require communications businesses to provide consumers’ data to third party providers at the consumer’s request to increase switching and stimulate innovation
- Establishing a vulnerable consumer challenge to encourage data-driven innovation to improve outcomes for vulnerable consumers
- Introducing strong data protection requirements and a cross-sectoral approach to regulation of third-party providers using smart data to build trust and minimise burdens on business.

These initiatives build on the approach in open banking, which is enabling consumers to ask their bank to share their current account transaction data securely with third parties. We have seen an explosion of new services that seek to make life easier for consumers—for example, through bringing together their current accounts into one platform or finding new ways to help consumers build an accurate credit score.

As announced by the Prime Minister yesterday, we are also signalling our agreement with the recommendation of the digital competition expert panel’s recommendation to establish a new digital markets unit to promote, among other things, data mobility and data openness across all sectors. As we take forward proposals on smart data, we will work closely to co-ordinate and integrate the recommendations as appropriate.

The Minister for Universities, Science, Research and Innovation (Chris Skidmore): I am pleased to announce to the House today the approach that the Government will take to develop a regulatory system fit for the industries of the future.

The fourth industrial revolution is characterised by rapid technological change that has the potential to transform our economy for the good. It can drive the creation of new sectors, powered by breakthroughs in areas such as artificial intelligence and robotics. It can help us find new ways of diagnosing and treating diseases or novel approaches to cutting carbon emissions and tackling climate change. It can give consumers greater choice and lower prices through greater competition.

To seize the opportunities that this wave of new technology brings, we must ensure that our regulatory system is open to innovation while maintaining protections for citizens and the environment. The need for reform is urgent: 92% of businesses from a range of sectors think they will feel a negative impact if regulators do not evolve to keep pace with innovation in the next two to three years.

We start from strong foundations. We are ranked among the top 10 global economies by the World Bank for the ease of doing business in the UK, with the quality of our regulatory practices given the highest overall country score by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. Our regulators have pioneered cutting-edge approaches such as regulatory sandboxes, which have been emulated across the world. But we must not stand idle as change approaches.

Our modern industrial strategy committed to developing a new agile approach to regulation that supports innovation and protects citizens and the environment. The White Paper on regulation for the fourth industrial revolution sets in motion the reforms our regulatory system needs to meet that commitment, building on recommendations made by the Council for Science and Technology.

We will establish a Regulatory Horizons Council to advise the Government on regulatory reform needed to support the rapid and safe introduction of technological innovation. The council will complement and draw upon existing horizon-scanning activity across government to put the UK at the forefront of the industries of the future. The council will also advise on where greater public dialogue is needed to build trust in how innovation is regulated.

We will consult on a digital regulation navigator for businesses to help them find their way through the complex regulatory landscape and engage with the right regulators at the right time on their proposals. We will also consult on measures to enhance co-ordination between regulators to ensure that innovations are guided smoothly through the system.

We will support regulators to play a greater role in the innovation economy, including reviewing the case to extend the regulators’ pioneer fund. We will also pilot an innovation test so that the impact of legislation on innovation is considered as it is introduced, implemented and reviewed.
Building on our global leadership in regulatory practices, we will enhance our influence by establishing a partnership with the World Economic Forum centre for the fourth industrial revolution to develop regulatory approaches for new technologies.

[HCWS1613]

HOME DEPARTMENT

Security and Intelligence: Implementation Stock-take

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Sajid Javid): Following the 2017 terrorist attacks in Manchester and London, MI5 and counter-terrorist policing conducted a review process which looked at how intelligence was handled prior to the Westminster, Manchester, London Bridge and Finsbury Park attacks, and also produced an operational improvement review to identify changes to improve their future performance.

My predecessor as Home Secretary asked David Anderson QC (now Lord Anderson of Ipswich KBE QC) to provide independent assurance of those reports. Lord Anderson published his assessment of the review process in December 2017.

My predecessor commissioned Lord Anderson to conduct a stock-take of the progress made by January 2019 in implementing the recommendations that had been generated by the review process.

Today, the Government are publishing Lord Anderson’s public summary of his stock-take. Lord Anderson has also provided me with a classified report, which has been copied to the Intelligence and Security Committee of Parliament and Investigatory Powers Commissioner.

In his stock-take, Lord Anderson says that implementation of the recommendations has been tackled with energy and commitment. He notes that as of January 2019 85% of the 104 recommendations were complete or on track for delivery. He also notes that, with very limited exceptions, recommendations were forecast to be complete on schedule, by the end of the year. He does however note some remaining obstacles for delivery of the remaining recommendations, which are set out in his report.

My Department will work closely with MI5 and CT policing on delivery of the remaining recommendations over the coming months.

My thoughts remain with the victims and all those affected by the 2017 attacks in Westminster, Manchester, London Bridge, Finsbury Park and Parsons Green.

Copies of the unclassified stock-take report will be made available on gov.uk and will be placed in the Libraries of both Houses.

[HCWS1611]
ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

General Licences for Controlling Wild Birds

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Dr Thérèse Coffey): On 4 May, DEFRA took on decision-making for the purposes covered by the general licences that had been revoked by Natural England on 25 April. An evidence-gathering exercise was then initiated in order to determine next steps which closed on 13 May.

Some 4,378 responses were received, some of which were general opinions, and 3,952 responses were more specific and have provided a useful set of evidence and views. The majority of responses came from individuals or smaller businesses and organisations. Thirty six local and national organisations also responded, including conservation, animal welfare, pest control, farming, game keeping and land management organisations.

The responses demonstrated a range of impacts that individuals and groups experienced as a result of Natural England’s revocation of licences GL04, 05 and 06. These include crow attacks on lambs and ewes during lambing, the risk of predation for eggs and fledglings of birds of conservation concern, and public health issues caused by pigeons in urban areas.

We recognise the unintended consequences of Natural England’s decision on 23 April and completely acknowledge the need to address this situation quickly. This is why we issued an urgent call for evidence so that we could assess the situation carefully.

Next steps will be confirmed imminently following engagement with users and other interested stakeholders.

A summary of the evidence and the Government response will also be published shortly.

We remain determined to ensure that we have a robust and effective licensing system in place.

[HCWS1615]

EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION

Bilateral Voting Rights: Portugal

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Mr Robin Walker): Today, I can confirm that the Government have reached a reciprocal agreement with Portugal that will secure the rights of UK nationals living in Portugal, and Portuguese citizens living in the UK, to stand and vote in local elections in both a deal and no deal. This agreement builds on our centuries of close ties with Portugal, dating back to the Anglo-Portuguese agreement in 1373, and is a welcome step towards our continuing close future relationship.

Citizens, including protecting the interests of British expats, have always been our priority in the negotiations for our departure from the EU. The UK pushed hard in negotiations to protect the right to stand and vote in local elections for UK nationals living in the EU, and EU citizens in the UK, but these rights were not included in the withdrawal agreement. Instead, we have been pursuing bilateral arrangements with individual member states to secure these rights on a bilateral basis. We have been clear that allowing EU citizens to vote in local elections in the UK should be considered alongside the rights and interests of UK nationals and it has been our priority to secure these reciprocally.

We have now reached agreements with Spain and Portugal and we are continuing our discussions with other member states.

I will be depositing the latest agreement in the Libraries of both Houses.

[HCWS1614]
Greater Manchester is a growing economy with a growing population of 2.8 million. Our shared national and local ambition is for the Greater Manchester local industrial strategy to boost productivity and people's earning power through our collaborative national, regional and local leadership, recognising the economic strengths and potential of Greater Manchester.

A copy of the Greater Manchester local industrial strategy will be placed in the Libraries of both Houses. [HCWS1616]

CABINET OFFICE
Boundary Commission for England

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (Kevin Foster): I should like to inform the House that my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Minister for the Cabinet Office has made the following appointments under schedule 1 to the Parliamentary Constituencies Act 1986 following a competition run in accordance with the governance code on public appointments:

Colin Byrne, appointed as a member of the Boundary Commission for England, effective from 1 July 2019 until 30 June 2024; and

Sarah Hamilton, appointed as a member of the Boundary Commission for England, effective from 1 July 2019 until 30 June 2024.

[HCWS1625]

TREASURY
UK Debt Management Office

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (John Glen): The United Kingdom Debt Management Office (DMO) has today published its business plan for the financial year 2019-20. Copies have been deposited in the Libraries of both houses and are available on the DMO's website, www.dmo.gov.uk.

[HCWS1622]

ECOFIN

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Mr Philip Hammond): A meeting of the Economic and Financial Affairs Council (ECOFIN) will be held in Luxembourg on 14 June 2019.

ECOFIN will be preceded by a morning meeting of the European Investment Bank (EIB) board of governors: 

Annual EIB board of governors meeting

The meeting of the EIB board of governors will include: statements from the Chairman, President and Chairman of the Audit Committee: a governors discussion: a presentation on the annual report of the Audit Committee: and a vote for partial renewal of the Audit Committee. The UK will be represented by Mark Bowman (Director General, International Finance, HM Treasury).

Following this, EU Finance Ministers will discuss the following at ECOFIN:

Early morning session

The Eurogroup President will brief the Council on the outcomes of the 13 June meeting of the Eurogroup, and the European Commission will provide an update on the current economic situation in the EU.
Banking union

The Council will be invited to endorse a progress report on the Banking Union.

Financial transaction tax

Ministers will receive a progress update in relation to the enhanced co-operation in the area of financial transaction tax.

G20 follow-up

The Council presidency and Commission will present the main outcomes of the G20 meeting of Finance Ministers and central bank governors, which took place on 8-9 June in Fukuoka, Japan.

European semester

Ministers will discuss the draft 2019 Country Specific Recommendations (CSRs) and progress towards the Europe 2020 targets.

Stability and growth pact

Ministers will be invited to adopt Council decisions and recommendations on the implementation of the stability and growth pact.

Clean planet

Ministers will exchange views on a strategic long-term vision for a climate-neutral economy.

Non-performing loans

Under any other business, the commission will provide an update on the implementation of the action plan to tackle non-performing loans in Europe.

[HCWS1623]

**DIGITAL, CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT**

**News Media Merger**

The Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Jeremy Wright): My Department has today written to Lebedev Holdings Limited (LHL) and Independent Digital News and Media Limited (IDNM), the owners of the Evening Standard and The Independent, to inform them that I am minded to issue an intervention notice. This relates to concerns I have that there may be public interest considerations—as set out in section 58 of the Enterprise Act 2002—that are relevant to the recent acquisition of a 30% stake by the International Media Company (IMC) in LHL and the linked transaction involving the acquisition of a 30% stake by Scalable LP in IDNM and that these concerns warrant further investigation.

A “minded to” letter has therefore been issued to the parties on one public interest ground specified in section 58 of the Enterprise Act 2002:

2A The need for (a) accurate presentation of news; and (b) free expression of opinion.

It is important to note that I have not taken a final decision on intervention at this stage. In line with the statutory guidance on media mergers, the “minded to” letter invites further representations in writing from the parties and gives them until 5pm on Monday 17 June to respond. I plan to make my final decision, which needs to be made on a quasi-judicial basis, on whether to issue an intervention notice no later than the week commencing 24 June.

If I decide to issue an intervention notice, the next stage would be for Ofcom to assess and report to me on the public interest concerns and for the Competition and Markets Authority (CMA) to assess and report to me on whether a relevant merger situation has been created and any impact this may have on competition. Following these reports, I would need to decide whether to refer the matter for a more detailed investigation by the CMA under section 45 of the Enterprise Act 2002.

In view of the time it has taken to obtain sufficient information to reach this point I have asked the parties to agree to extend the statutory time limit to allow Ofcom and the Competitions and Markets Authority to report to me on the public interest issues raised by the transaction.

I will keep Parliament updated on progress with this media merger case.

[HCWS1624]

**ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS**

**Agriculture and Fisheries Council**

The Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (Mr Robert Goodwill): As the provisional agenda stands, the primary focus for fisheries policy will be on the regulation on the European maritime and fisheries fund (EMFF) for which a preliminary agreement on the proposal, a partial general approach (PGA), is sought in Council. It will constitute the Council’s mandate for negotiations with the European Parliament.

The European Commission will also present its communication on the state of play of the common fisheries policy (CFP) and consultation on the fishing opportunities for 2020, after which Ministers will exchange views.

In the field of agriculture the main focus will be on the post-2020 common agricultural policy (CAP) reform package for which the Romanian presidency has provided a progress report on the negotiations during their presidency. The progress report will be discussed at Council. The reform package covers the three legislative proposals: regulation on CAP strategic plans, regulation on financing, management and monitoring of the CAP, and regulation on common market organisation (CMO) of agricultural products.

There are currently no items scheduled for discussion under “any other business”.

[HCWS1619]

**FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH OFFICE**

**Foreign Affairs Council**

The Minister for Europe and the Americas (Sir Alan Duncan): The Foreign Affairs Council (FAC) will take place in Luxembourg on 17 June. It will be chaired by
the High Representative of the European Union (EU) for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy (HRVP), Federica Mogherini.

The FAC will discuss current affairs, the effectiveness of the EU common foreign and security partnership (CFSP) as well as the EU’s global strategy, Sudan, and over lunch with the Jordanian Foreign Minister Ayman Safadi, the middle east peace process.

Current affairs

We expect HRVP Mogherini to debrief Ministers on her trip to the horn of Africa and the developing political situation in the region. HRVP Mogherini will also provide an update on recent developments in Venezuela, including on the international contact group and Lima group ministerial meeting held in New York on 3 June.

We expect Iran to be raised following Iran's announcement to partially cease meeting commitments under the Iran nuclear deal and given the upcoming 60-day deadline.

We expect HRVP Mogherini and Ministers to consider next steps as we seek to avoid further escalation.

CFSP effectiveness and the EU global strategy

Foreign Ministers will consider how the EU can improve its approach to foreign and security policy. Defence Ministers will join Foreign Ministers for a strategic debate on the EU’s global strategy and how it works internationally. They will consider the EU’s role on security, burden sharing and coherence among defence initiatives.

Sudan

Following the UK’s request, Ministers will discuss the situation in Sudan, taking stock of recent political events, including the Sudanese security forces’ use of violence on civilians, and consider how the EU should respond to support the African Union in ensuring a transition to civilian rule.

Lunch on MEPP with the Jordanian Foreign Minister

The Jordanian Foreign Minister is expected to join EU Ministers to discuss the middle east peace process, prior to the EU-Jordan Association Council. Ahead of the publication of the Kushner plan, the UK will reiterate its support for a two state solution and encourage all parties to keep an open mind once the plan is published.

The UK will note the importance of HM King Abdullah II’s role as custodian of the Christian and Muslim holy sites, and reiterate our long-standing position on Jerusalem.

Council conclusions

The Council is expected to adopt conclusions on effective multilateralism; security and defence; central Asia strategy; the EU’s engagement in the Black sea region; strengthening the ban on anti-personnel mines; and human rights guidelines on safe drinking water and sanitation.

[HCWS1620]

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

Fortification of Flour

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Seema Kennedy): Further to the Government’s announcement on 23 October 2018 of the intention to consult on the issue of mandatory fortification of flour with folic acid to help prevent neural tube defects in foetuses, I wish to inform the House that the consultation will launch today and will run for 12 weeks.

Neural tube defects are birth defects of the brain, spine, or spinal cord. They happen in the first few weeks of pregnancy, often before a woman even knows that she is pregnant. The two most common neural tube defects are spina bifida and anencephaly. These can be devastating conditions and the Government are fully aware of the effect these have on the individuals themselves and their families.

There is strong evidence that many neural tube defects can be prevented by increasing women’s intake of folic acid.

Unless you are pregnant or thinking of having a baby, you should be able to get all the folic acid you need by eating a varied and balanced diet. Existing pregnancy advice to women who are trying to conceive or who are likely to become pregnant is that they are advised to take a daily supplement of 400 micrograms of folic acid until the 12th week of pregnancy. They are also advised to increase their daily intake of folate by eating more folate-rich foods, for example spinach and broccoli, and foods voluntarily fortified with folic acid such a wide range of breakfast cereals.

However, we know that in the UK around half of pregnancies are unplanned. In those which are planned, it has been estimated that only half of all mothers took folic acid supplements or modified their diet to increase folate intake. This has led to calls for mandatory fortification of flour with folic acid, so women can get it from dietary sources other than foods that naturally contain it.

The Scientific Advisory Committee on Nutrition (SACN) has recommended mandatory folic acid fortification of flour to improve the folate status of women most at risk of neural tube defect-affected pregnancies. Further detail on this is in the consultation document.

We are now opening a consultation to seek views on this proposed change and we hope that members of the public as well as industry and the scientific community respond so we can accurately consider this proposal.

I have agreed with the Governments of Scotland and Wales, and the permanent secretary of Northern Ireland that this will be a joint consultation between the devolved Administrations and England. This is because any resulting decisions would need to be taken on a whole-UK basis to minimise impact on trade and for industry to comply. Similarly, the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs has been closely involved as flour falls within its remit.

[HCWS1618]

JUSTICE

Divorce, Dissolution and Separation Bill

The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice (Mr David Gauke): I am pleased to announce that the Government are today introducing in the House of Commons the Divorce, Dissolution and Separation Bill.
This legislation follows the Government’s response to the consultation on reform of the legal requirements for divorce in England and Wales. I previously laid this response before Parliament (Official Report, 9 April 2019 Vol. 658 c.8WS).

Marriage and family have long been vitally important to our functioning as a society. Where a marriage or civil partnership regrettably breaks down and is beyond repair, the law must deal with that reality with the minimum of acrimony by creating the conditions for people to move forward and agree arrangements for the future in an orderly and constructive way. Above all, the legal process should not exacerbate conflict between parents, as this is especially damaging for children. The process must better support and encourage parents to co-operate in bringing up their children.

The evidence is clear that the current legal requirements can needlessly rake up the past to justify the legal ending of a relationship that is no longer a beneficial and functioning one. The requirement for one person to blame the other—if it is not practical for them to have separated for at least two years—can introduce or worsen conflict at the outset of the process, conflict that may continue long after the legal process has concluded. Allegations about a spouse’s conduct may bear no relation to the real cause of the breakdown. Such allegations do not serve the interests of society or help family relationships to heal. Instead, they can be damaging to any prospects for couples to reconcile or to agree practical arrangements for the future. In the extremely difficult circumstances of divorce, the law should allow couples, where reconciliation is not possible, to move on constructively.

The Divorce, Dissolution and Separation Bill will change or remove conflict flashpoints. It will align the law with the non-confrontational approach that Parliament has enacted in other areas of family law. Among its measures, the Bill will replace the requirement to prove spousal conduct or for the couple to have been separated for at least two years with the requirement to file a statement of irretrievable breakdown of the marriage or civil partnership. It will introduce a new minimum period of 20 weeks between the start of proceedings and confirmation to the court that the conditional order should be made. This will make the period before the conditional order is granted longer for most people, and so allow better opportunity for reflecting on the decision to divorce and, where this is inevitable, agreeing practical arrangements for the future.

This is an important piece of legislation that will bring overdue reform. It is not about making the decision to divorce or to dissolve a civil partnership easier. That will remain one of the hardest decisions anyone can take. It is about reforming those elements of the current legal process that can exacerbate conflict and cause unnecessary distress at an already difficult time, and better supporting agreement about arrangements for the future. I know that hon. and right hon. Members will take great interest in this opportunity to make a positive impact on the lives of the many families who sadly find themselves affected by breakdown. My Ministerial colleagues and I look forward to working with them through the passage of the Bill.

[HCWS1621]
supported these conclusions as we support the work of Europol, and agrees that better co-ordination between networks hosted by Europol would be helpful for criminal justice co-operation.

The Council also adopted conclusions on the retention of data for the purpose of fighting crime, which proposed further exploration of options for lawful regimes in member states. The UK believes the appropriate retention of telecommunications data for law enforcement purposes is an important element of an effective law enforcement system and supported these conclusions. The Commission provided an update on the planned preparatory steps to make the European Public Prosecutor’s Office (EPPO) operational by the end of 2020. The UK has not opted into EPPO.

The Council adopted an implementing decision confirming that the UK could connect to the Prüm automated system for exchanging DNA data between law enforcement authorities in EU member states.

Interior day began with a discussion on the future of EU law enforcement. Ministers agreed that further co-operation on approaches to law enforcement would make for more effective cross-border law enforcement. The Council supported effective implementation of existing legislation, especially interoperability of databases, and recognised the need to address the impacts of technological advancements on law enforcement, supporting Europol’s role in pooling expertise and providing technological and analytical support. The UK Permanent Representative to the EU intervened to support this work and welcome the intent to work together, co-ordinate methods and approaches and support the proposal for a Europol innovation hub. In this context, the UK intervention additionally highlighted UK work to tackle online harms through the UK White Paper.

Under AOB, the Council CT co-ordinator (Gilles de Kerchove) presented on the implications on law enforcement of the move to 5G. The CT co-ordinator focused on the need for the EU to influence 5G standards, to ensure a dialogue with service providers on this issue, and to consider EU legislation to avoid fragmentation of member state approaches. The Commissioner for the Security Union (Sir Julian King) noted the Commission’s intent to develop an EU risk assessment and toolbox of options to mitigate risks by the end of 2019.

The chair of the counter-terrorism group, a non-EU grouping of European states intelligence agencies, attended to update the JHA Council on the general terrorist threat and the challenges and opportunities from new tools and technologies. The CTG chair also updated on discussions on co-operation with Europol on strategic and technical issues, noting that operational intelligence work remained the sole responsibility of member states.

Over lunch and in the afternoon session, Ministers discussed migration, with a focus on issues of solidarity and redistribution of migrants. Member states remain split on the EU’s approach to these issues. The UK intervention focused on our extensive support upstream which ranges from tackling organised immigration crime and the use of strategic communications to building partnerships and capability with source and transit countries to jointly address the drivers of migration.

The Council agreed a partial general approach on the draft directive on common standards and procedures in member states for returning illegally staying third-country nationals, recast, with the exception of article 22 on the border procedure and the related recitals. The UK has not opted into this measure.

The Council also agreed partial general approaches on draft regulations establishing the integrated border management fund, establishing the asylum and migration fund, and establishing the internal security fund. These are subject to wider negotiations on the overall multi-annual financial framework. The UK will not participate in any of these funds.

[HCWS1626]

TRANSPORT

Transport Council

The Secretary of State for Transport (Chris Grayling): The Transport Council took place in Luxembourg on Thursday 6 June. This was the only Transport Council under the Romanian presidency (the presidency). The UK was represented by the UK’s Deputy Permanent Representative to the EU, Katrina Williams. The Council reached a general approach on the third tranche of the “mobility package” for a legal framework for the electronic communication of freight transport information. The UK welcomed the work that the presidency had done to achieve compromises on this text, as did a number of other member states. The presidency gave a progress report on the proposal from the third tranche of the “mobility package” to streamline planning and approval processes for projects on the trans-European transport network (TEN-T). Some delegations took the opportunity to flag outstanding concerns including scope, the role of the single competent authority and the duration of the permit granting process.

There was also a progress report on the proposal from the first tranche of the “mobility package” hired vehicles directive, although discussion illustrated that there are still outstanding issues to be resolved.

The Council was also given a progress report on the proposal from the first tranche of the “mobility package” to revise the current directive on Eurovignette (road charging). The UK intervened to highlight the need for flexibility in determining national charging schemes, a view shared by a number of other member states.

Over lunch, Ministers from Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and the Ukraine along with representatives from the World Bank, the European Investment Bank and the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development participated in a joint discussion with the Council and Commissioners Bulc and Hahn on the progress made by the eastern area partnership (EaP) in developing the external dimension of the TEN-T policy. Welcoming the progress made in relation to road safety, TEN-T connectivity and planning for future investment in transport infrastructure, the Council endorsed the joint EU-EaP declaration as a road map for future co-operation.

Later, the Council was given a further progress report on negotiations on the proposals to revise the regulation on rail passengers’ rights and obligations.
Finally, there were several information points from member states, the presidency and Commissioner Bulc under any other business. Several member states supported Luxembourg's call for consideration of aviation taxation as an additional means to tackle emissions reduction. The presidency gave information on discussions in other Councils on “A clean planet for all”, the Commission’s long-term climate strategy. On addressing airspace capacity, Commissioner Bulc noted the recent publications of the airspace architecture study and the wise person’s report on the future of air traffic management. The Commission noted the first findings of its study on sustainable transport infrastructure charging and the internalisation of transport externalities, which was published on the day of the Council, and updated the Council on the connectivity outcomes of the EU-China summit. The presidency provided an update on current legislative proposals and the Polish delegation provided information on the conference on “Benefits for regions resulting from the implementation of the route Via Carpatia”. Finally, Finland presented transport plans for its forthcoming presidency of the Council of the European Union.
Petition

Tuesday 4 June 2019

PRESENTED PETITION
Petition presented to the House but not read on the Floor

Yamuna River

The petition of residents of the United Kingdom,

Declares that the Yamuna is worshipped by millions and is considered a holy river; the residents of the United Kingdom recognise the work of the save Yamuna campaign and request that the British Prime Minister work with the Prime Minister of India, Narendra Modi and the Indian Government to treat their industrial and domestic waste and not pour treated or untreated waste water into the Yamuna river and necessarily ensure that adequate natural flow of fresh water throughout the stretch, which starts from Yamunotri to Allahabad.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to assist the Indian Government and take into consideration that there is a dire need to save the Yamuna river and remove toxic waste.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Keith Vaz.]
Petition

Wednesday 5 June 2019

OBSERVATIONS

CHANCELLOR OF THE DUCHY OF LANCASTER AND CABINET OFFICE

Public confidence in the Prime Minister

The petition of Residents of the United Kingdom,
Declares that the Prime Minister repeatedly promised that the UK would leave the European Union on 29 March 2019 and that the only way to prevent that happening without a deal was for our Prime Minister’s Withdrawal Agreement to be approved by Parliament; further notes that despite her Withdrawal Agreement having been rejected by the House of Commons on three separate occasions, the Prime Minister intervened personally to prevent UK leaving the EU on 29 March 2019, further intervened to prevent the UK leaving the EU on 12 April 2019 and has now agreed with the EU without the prior approval of her Cabinet or Parliament that the UK cannot leave the EU before 31 October 2019 without a deal notwithstanding having incurred expenditure in excess of £4 billion for that purpose and the Prime Minister having repeatedly stated to UK citizens that in her view no deal is better than a bad deal; further expresses its dismay that the Prime Minister has also conceded that the UK is not allowed to renegotiate the Withdrawal Agreement or open negotiations on a future relationship with the EU prior to 31 October 2019 thereby going back on her guarantee that nothing is agreed until everything is agreed; and further as a result that they have no confidence in the Prime Minister.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons hold a debate and make a decision on a motion of no confidence in the Prime Minister at the earliest opportunity.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Sir Christopher Chope, Official Report, 30 April 2019; Vol. 659, c. 175.]

Observations from the Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Kevin Foster):

The Fixed-term Parliaments Act 2011 sets out in legislation the wording for a motion of no confidence, namely “That this House has no confidence in Her Majesty’s Government”. If such a motion is carried and the House does not pass a subsequent motion “That this House has confidence in Her Majesty’s Government” within 14 days, an early general election will take place.

It is an established convention that if the Official Opposition tables a no confidence motion in Her Majesty’s Government, the Government will facilitate Parliamentary time for a debate on that motion. This last happened in January 2019 when the House of Commons confirmed it had confidence in the Government.
Ministerial Corrections

Tuesday 4 June 2019

EDUCATION

Education

The following are extracts from the debate on 15 May 2019 on the draft Higher Education and Research Act 2017 (Further Implementation etc.) Regulations 2019.

Chris Skidmore: 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.


Chris Skidmore: 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.


Letter of correction from the Minister for Universities, Science, Research and Innovation:

Errors have been identified in my speech during the debate.

The correct information should have been:

Chris Skidmore: 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, one of which is serious breach of conditions of registration.

Chris Skidmore: 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 both schools and institutions that are not schools in receipt of funding from local authorities 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. The substitution is the same for regulation 32.
Ministerial Corrections

Monday 10 June 2019

EDUCATION

Authorised Absence from School

The following is an extract from the Westminster Hall debate on Authorised Absence from School on 5 June 2019.

Nick Gibb: I am grateful to my hon. Friend and other hon. Members for highlighting the issues around school attendance. To answer my hon. Friend’s question about how the money is spent, the requirement is for it to be reinvested in the attendance system in the local area. The system is intended to be cost-neutral. Many areas spend it on supporting projects to improve school attendance locally.


Letter of correction from the Minister for School Standards:

An error has been identified in the response I gave to my hon. Friend the Member for St Austell and Newquay (Steve Double).

The correct response should have been:

Nick Gibb: I am grateful to my hon. Friend and other hon. Members for highlighting the issues around school attendance. To answer my hon. Friend’s question about how the money is spent, the requirement is for it to be reinvested in the attendance system in the local area. The system is intended to be cost-neutral. Many areas spend it on supporting enforcement projects to improve school attendance locally.

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Topical Questions

The following is an extract from International Development questions on 6 June 2019.

T3. [911180] Liz Twist (Blaydon) (Lab): For the past 25 years, the UK has rightly been committed to ensuring that aid spending is untied from commercial interests. How does the Secretary of State explain the ONE Campaign’s research that found that almost £475 million of UK aid was still effectively tied?

Rory Stewart: We are very clear that we do not tie aid spending. There may be situations in which it is beneficial. For example, we have just put £70 million into British universities to find a universal cure for snake bites. That is a very good example of how we can solve a global public health problem through investment in British universities, but that is not tied aid; it is because British research and development, particularly the Liverpool School of Tropical Medicine, is the leader in this area.


Letter of correction from the Secretary of State for International Development:

Errors have been identified in the response I gave to the hon. Member for Blaydon (Liz Twist).

The correct response should have been:

Rory Stewart: We are very clear that we do not tie aid spending. There may be situations in which it is beneficial. For example, we have put more than £70 million into research, including with British universities, to develop new drugs, such as a universal cure for snake bites. That is a very good example of how we can solve a global public health problem through investment in British universities, but that is not tied aid; it is because British research and development, such as at the Liverpool School of Tropical Medicine, is a leader in this area.
Ministerial Correction

Wednesday 12 June 2019

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE
Medical Aesthetics Industry: Regulation

The following is an extract from the Westminster Hall debate on Medical Aesthetics Industry: Regulation on 14 May 2019.

Jackie Doyle-Price: 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, which will put them on a similar footing to Botox and will mean that they need to be given by the prescriber.


Letter of correction from the Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, the hon. Member for Thurrock (Jackie Doyle-Price):

An error has been identified in the response I gave to my hon. Friend the Member for South Leicestershire (Alberto Costa).

The correct information should have been:

Jackie Doyle-Price: We are moving into a new period of regulation of dermal fillers. My hon. Friend the Member for South Leicestershire is quite right that some are completely unregulated at present, but they will all become regulated by the Medicines and Healthcare Products Regulatory Agency from May 2020.